

A composite image featuring a man with a beard and a young boy smiling, with another man's face partially visible in the foreground. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene.

Where He Belongs

Gay Romance

Trina Solet

Where He Belongs: Gay Romance

By Trina Solet
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Chapter 1

Gus was navigating the early morning traffic, trying to get Josh to school on time. His days of driving a two-seater and recklessly weaving his way through rush hour traffic were behind him. Now he was a careful driver, and there was a booster seat in the back of his Jeep Wrangler.

On mornings like this one, Gus kind of missed the days when he could curse to his heart's content at slow drivers and inconveniently timed red lights. Those days were over. He had a six year old in the back, who delighted in every bad word his dad let slip on a rare occasion. Gus had to keep a lid on it.

That's why he got creative with stress relief. He had Josh count the seconds at each red light.

"Here we go!" Josh announced as soon as Gus was forced to hit the breaks at yet another intersection. Then he started counting as loudly as he could, "One Mississippi, two Mississippi..."

When he hit the bigger numbers, Josh always slowed down and had to think hard about what came next. That's when Gus would help him out. When they first started this game, Josh could count to seventy-two. Now he could count into the two hundreds.

As the light turned green, Josh yelled, "And we have liftoff!" just like Gus taught him.

That was better than starting every one of his days cursing. And that was only one small change in his life since he decided to become a father. Gus no longer felt the pressure to succeed at any cost, to outpace the competition as other young executives breathed down his neck. He no longer spent a good half of his day in a suit and tie. He left the tie at home and carried his jacket over his arm. Most of the time, he left it hanging over the back of his chair. There weren't many people he needed to impress.

Ambition had filled a hole in his life before Josh arrived. Now Josh was his life. He took over, demolished the competition, and took charge of Gus's every waking moment. He was the new boss and the only person Gus cared to impress any more. Good thing he was easy. Gus could still count higher than Josh, reach for stuff on the top shelf, lift him up with just one arm, and get him to school on time despite all obstacles.

"Good job, Dad," Josh said as he jumped out of the car in front of his school.

Gus gave him a hug and a kiss. "Have fun and learn stuff," Gus told him as he helped him put on his book bag.

Gus looked at his boy, taking a mental picture of him to carry with him for the rest of his day. Josh had dark blond hair and slate blue eyes. He was skinny and tall for his age, all arms and legs and missing front teeth. Josh gave him a big, gap-toothed grin and ran to the entrance of the school, his arms and legs flailing, his book bag bouncing.

As long as Gus got to see his boy smile, every day would start the right way for him. Gus watched Josh get inside, and then he drove to work. On the way, he indulged in an occasional f-bomb now that his kid wasn't there to hear him and learn from his bad example.

Gus turned a corner and pulled into Walnut Lane with its busy sidewalks well shaded by trees. It was a nice place to take a stroll. The street was lined with small shops and restaurants. Gus liked to think that Walnut Lane Bistro was one of its main attractions. Right in the middle of the long street, the bistro where Gus worked was a brown building with modern lines.

Gus turned into a small side street to the parking area in the back. Even

the parking lot was shaded by trees and pleasant. This early in the morning, it was almost empty. Once lunch service started, the parking would fill up and even overflow into other parking areas and along the side streets.

As he got out, Gus surveyed the back of the bistro to make sure everything was in order. After all whenever anything went wrong, it landed squarely on his desk. Though it was a challenge, things at the bistro had definitely turned around since Gus started managing the troubled business.

Walnut Lane Bistro had an ideal location. There was every reason to expect it to succeed. The first time Gus walked in, he knew it as the kind of place where he would have liked to stop in on his lunch hour, maybe even bring a client or a date. He inherited a slew of problems from the previous manager, but the place had serious potential.

The décor in front was modern, but the lighting and the colors were warm and soothing. The way Gus thought of it was that here it was always a beautiful evening in early fall. Photographs from two local artists were displayed in narrow, rectangular frames spaced evenly on two walls. The chairs were black. The tables were metal topped with wood in a mellow brown.

The younger Gus wouldn't have been pleased if he saw where the thirty-one year old Gus currently worked. The bistro might be awesome in front, but Gus worked in the office in the back. The kitchen took up most of the space. The rest was dedicated to storage. What was left was the so-called manager's office, but there were boxes stacked in there as well.

The space was charm free and utilitarian. The furniture was old and plain, but it served Gus just fine. He had aspired to spacious, finely furnished offices once, but he had left those ambitions behind when he decided that what he really wanted was a job that would let him spend time with Josh. He settled for less money and more time, and a very unimpressive office where his son was welcome any time.

When Gus walked in, he noticed that there was something different about his office today. A very good-looking surprise was waiting by his desk. He had no idea why the slim, dark haired man was there, but he was delighted to see him. Screw fancy furniture, this is how you redecorate an office. Put a gorgeous looking man in the middle of it, and everything else fades into the background. Gus was so taken with the sight that he forgot he was at work. All he could see was a hard body in perfectly tailored, black slacks and a crisp, white shirt. And all he could think about was getting his hands on every inch of that physique.

Reminding himself where he was, Gus sobered a little. The man was still turned away from him, giving Gus a chance to recover at least a semblance of professionalism. Since he was probably there on business and possibly straight, Gus wiped the smile off his face and put on a serious expression as he approached the guy.

The man's hair was black and perfectly combed. When he turned to Gus, he showed him his dark eyes. Gus couldn't help but beam at him. Putting on his biggest smile, Gus extended his hand in greeting and introduced himself.

"Gus Dwyer. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Jack Velarde," he said in a deep, mellow voice and took Gus's hand almost defiantly.

While Gus admired his beautiful eyes, Jack stood straight and stiff. Everything about his stance told Gus to keep away. As he shook his hand, he gave Gus a cautionary look. It said something like "don't mess with me". Oh, but Gus wanted to mess with him so very much.

"Jack Velarde," Gus repeated, liking the feel of the name as it rolled off his tongue. "So, you're Doug's stepbrother. He said you might want to invest in this place." Doug said a lot of things like that, but Gus didn't usually put much stock in what he said. Doug might own the bistro, but he was hopelessly unreliable.

Jack cocked his head to the side. "I already did. I own a half interest."

That was a surprise. It almost knocked the grin off Gus's face.

"So I work for you now as well." Gus realized that he just met his new boss. "As you see, Doug keeps me well-informed. He also told me all about you coming in today and everything." Sarcasm probably wasn't a good idea under the circumstances. He had a new boss to impress, and this guy didn't seem like he was going to be as easy as Doug.

"He is frustrating," Jack said with a sigh.

Gus nodded, but actually, Doug's more casual approach was fine with him. It was easier to take charge without interference from above. Right away, he could tell that Jack was going to be a different story.

"Have you had a tour of your new investment?" Gus asked.

"Doug was supposed to show me around."

"The same way he was supposed to let me know about the changes at the top?"

Jack sighed again. "I better take that tour then."

Gus led him to the front of the house first. The tables were being set up for lunch service. Knowing who he was, the servers looked at Jack cautiously. They probably had more job security than Gus did.

As Jack looked around, Gus tried to read him. The man was a closed book right now, but Gus had already seen his real self slip through. Jack Velarde couldn't keep those pretty eyes from showing too much of himself however hard he tried.

Jack looked to be in his mid twenties, but he reminded Gus of the hardened, business-minded young men he had met by the dozens in his corporate days. Those men only saw numbers and smiled like they were going to bill you for it later. They seemed older, sapped of their youth by ambition and greed. Until Josh came along, that could have been a description of Gus. He wasn't sure about Jack though. He had that cast, but Gus couldn't tell yet

how deep it went.

After giving Jack time to see what there was to see of the front for himself, Gus spoke up. "As you see, the place is pretty low key. We get a lot of shoppers dropping in during the day plus the workers from the office complex in Newman Square and Hawthorn Business Plaza. At night we get a mix – couples, groups, families. When I started, they were billing it as more hip and trendy. I think that's why Doug liked it, but that approach wasn't working. The crowd we have coming in isn't looking for anything upscale. They want casual so that's what we give them. I wanted to make sure that the place was just special enough to make it worth the trip but not intimidating. So far it's working."

Jack nodded noncommittally. "I'd like to look at the books."

"Sure. Feel free to check my math," Gus said.

For now Jack was only checking out their dinner and lunch menus. As he sat down across from Jack at one of the tables, Gus imagined for a second that they were on a date. Even then Jack would be a challenge. Gus would have to figure him out, crack through his defenses slowly until he made the man his.

"You're not going to find anything too exciting," Gus told him seeing how thoroughly he studied the menu. Gus had left most of the menu decisions to the chefs, but he stood behind their choices.

"That's just as it should be. I see a few interesting items, but the rest are proven favorites," Jack said as he closed the menu.

"They're doing lunch prep in the kitchen. You want them to make you anything so you can taste it for yourself?" Gus offered.

"No, I have another lunch meeting."

"At a fancier restaurant, I bet," Gus needled him. He knew that Jack was well off and probably used to the finer things in life.

"Actually, yes. That doesn't mean that I will prefer the food over there."

"Just the company?"

Jack gave him a surprised look. "It's a business meeting," he said.

Gus smiled at his need to defend himself. It was none of his business even if Jack was going to an orgy, but Gus was glad to know it wasn't a date.

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As Jack stepped out through the back doors of Walnut Lane Bistro, he took a deep breath. The early spring air was crisp and refreshing, and sunlight danced on the new leaves of the trees. Despite being satisfied with his newest investment, Jack left the bistro feeling a little on edge. He would have expected that if he had to deal with Doug, but there was a different source of discomfort waiting for him in the manager Doug had hired. The man was more competent, more appealing and more forward than Jack expected.

Gus Dwyer was attractive but hardly stunning. He had sandy, light brown hair and warm, brown eyes. His body seemed solid under a blue shirt and gray

trousers. Nothing about his appearance prepared Jack for the effect Gus had on him.

Though their only physical contact had been that disconcerting handshake, which sent a tremor through Jack's whole body, he felt Gus's presence every second they spent together. It was an effect Jack had only experienced when he knew without a doubt that an encounter with a man would turn sexual. His body would be primed and thrumming, ready to switch gears as soon as there was enough privacy to slide down a man's body and take him in his mouth.

Though he knew from Doug that Gus was gay, that should not have been his reaction to meeting him. But there was undisguised attraction in Gus's eyes. His voice was deep, and Jack felt like it was tuned perfectly to reach inside him and put unseemly thoughts in his head. It had a quality of a proposition spoken up close, right in Jack's ear. "I know you want to." Jack didn't know how he was supposed to conduct business with that man on his mind.

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Later that day, Gus had just arrived from picking up Josh from school when Jack came into the office.

"You're back," Gus said, happy to see him again so soon.

"I wanted to see how the staff handles dinner."

"You're in plenty of time to see that and also to meet my son," Gus said as Josh came back from the office bathroom. "This is Josh, my boss and also my son. Josh, this is my other boss. His name is Jack. But you might want to call him Mr. Velarde."

Josh looked from Jack to Gus then back to Jack with a thoughtful frown.

"He's not my boss, is he? I like Jack better. I'll just call him Jack," Josh decided and stuck out his hand for Jack to shake. "I washed my hands after I used the bathroom. Nice to meet you."

Gus swore he saw a twinkle in Jack's eye as he looked at Josh. Maybe he wasn't a complete stuffed shirt.

"Hello. Nice to meet you too," Jack said as he took Josh's hand.

As Josh shook his hand with a big pumping motion, Jack's expression was caught somewhere between delight and fear. He quickly covered it up with his usual stern and impassive look.

Seeing Josh open his mouth to pester Jack, Gus stepped in.

"Jack didn't come here to talk to you. He's here on business. Do your homework," Gus said before Josh could speak. Gus pointed to the second desk in the office, which Josh used to do his homework after school.

Josh still looked eager to ask a million questions, like he did of everyone he met and every new employee at the bistro. Seeing the warning look on Gus's face, he huffed with suppressed curiosity and went to his desk. Josh

took a seat and scraped his chair noisily as he pulled it in.

Now that Josh's back was turned, Jack gave Gus a look as if he was asking what Josh was doing there. Gus hoped he wouldn't have a problem with it. Spending time with Josh was the main reason he took this job. Gus loved that moment at the end of the school day when Josh ran into his arms full of news about his day. Gus would lift him up high, book bag and all, and Josh would giggle. Bringing Josh to work had gone from a bonus to a necessity. He couldn't imagine giving that up for any job.

As Jack went to the kitchen to watch them work, Gus went with him. Josh tried to follow, but Gus pointed him back to his homework desk. Josh gave him a pitiful face. He loved watching the almost chaotic, action-packed kitchen. Learning all the restaurant shorthand was his hobby. His favorite was "hot behind". It still made him giggle. He was only allowed to watch from a stepstool that was kept in the corner so he wouldn't get trampled. Josh would get excited by all the hustle and bustle anyway.

Gus could understand why Josh liked it so much. It was noisy in there with the clanging of pots and utensils, and the terse instructions and responses flying back and forth. But this was nothing compared to the frenzy of dinner service in full swing. This was only prep time.

The kitchen was full of steam as a number of large pots were boiling away. There was some impressively fast slicing and dicing to watch. Gus always wished he could spend more time observing the work that went on in the kitchen. He was dying to learn a few things, but there was never enough time, plus the pace in there was dizzying. If he dared to ask useless, amateur questions, he got his answer sandwiched between several murderous glares for bothering them.

Gus showed Jack the best place to stand so they would be out of everyone's way. The space in there was at a premium. Gus had been elbowed out of the way a few times before he learned his lesson. Everyone in the kitchen was such a tyrant. When he was in there, Gus could forget all about being the boss. He felt even less like the boss with Jack there ready and able to turn everything Gus had worked for on its head if he chose.

"Do you bring your son to work often?" Jack asked while watching the highly skilled knife work going on in front of them.

"All the time," Gus said, challenging him to make an issue of it. "That's the deal I made with Doug. He let me bring Josh to work, and I saved his restaurant from utter ruin."

Actually it didn't take any hard negotiating to get Doug to agree. At the mention of Gus bringing Josh to work, Doug just shrugged and said, "Sure, whatever. You're the boss."

"You should look into hiring a babysitter," Jack said without looking at Gus.

Gus turned to him, trying to judge whether he was making a suggestion or

telling him he had to. "Or I could hire a hot munny. You available?"

"No."

Gus wondered if he just got an answer to a question he hadn't meant to ask. Maybe Jack was seeing someone. "You are probably out of my price range anyway," Gus said. He was dying to confirm if Jack was in a relationship. Of course if he didn't let Gus bring Josh to work, it would become a moot point because Gus would go from Jack's admirer to an enemy for life.

Later on, when they served the family meal for the staff right before dinner service started, Jack refused the invitation to eat with them and stayed in the office. Even Josh couldn't get him to join them. That didn't keep Josh from bringing him a plate of food to eat in the office when he and Gus came back.

"Eat up. You're skinny like me. You can't skip dinner," Josh told him as he set the food on his desk.

The look on Jack's face was priceless. He wasn't as tall as Gus, but Jack was in great shape. Gus could tell that if he ran his hands up and down over every inch of him, it would all be hard, lean muscle. Gus flexed his fingers. The palms of his hands tingled at the thought, and he felt tense with the need to let his hands roam Jack's body. Why did Doug's partner have to look like that? How was Gus supposed to concentrate on his work?

When it was Gus's quitting time, he went to say goodbye to Jack who was lurking near the kitchen again. He was busy typing on his phone.

"Do you know of a good gym?" Jack asked, seeing him approach.

"You're not letting what Josh said get to you, are you?" Gus asked. Jack's body had been driving him crazy all day.

"The gym at my hotel is always crowded. Doug recommended a place..."

"So you know to stay away from there," Gus said.

"I assumed it was a meat market."

"No doubt. Try Ivan's Gym if you want something serious. Fit House is more for regular guys. Everyone calls it Fat House. That should give you an idea of what it's like in there."

Jack thanked him and looked them up on his phone. Gus would kill to see him working out. He groaned involuntarily at the image of Jack sweating and straining. At the sound, Jack turned to stare at him.

"I was just thinking how much I needed to work out," Gus said to explain himself.

Jack looked him up and down. "You look OK," he said blandly.

"And that's exactly why I need to work out more," Gus said. "I have some equipment at home, but Josh always wants to exercise with me, then we start goofing around and then we eat snacks." Gus smiled at the memories of all the times they did that. It was fun but counterproductive. He always told Josh he

was making him fat. Josh would just shrug. With his skinny shoulders, that boy had perfected the art of a shrug.

Jack stared at him strangely as he stood there grinning to himself.

"You really enjoy being a father, don't you?"

"It's the best," Gus confirmed.

Jack only nodded vaguely, like he didn't understand the appeal. Oh well, it wasn't for everyone.

When Gus told him he was leaving for the day, Jack was surprised to hear it.

"Johanna takes over for me at 6:00. When I come in in the morning, I look over the receipts and her report from the night before. Johanna is very competent. You'll see that for yourself when you grill her," Gus said. He wondered if Jack would have yet another problem with Gus leaving at such a busy time and splitting his management duties.

Jack stayed unreadable, leaving Gus unsure about where things stood. Maybe he wasn't the ideal manager for a busy restaurant, but he liked his job. He hoped he would get to keep it.

Chapter 2

Waking to bright sunshine that flooded his bedroom, Gus immediately thought of Josh and what he might be up to. It was way too late on a Saturday for Josh not to have gotten into ten different kinds of mischief. Gus got out of bed with a grumble, knowing he would need to deal with something.

It was like that for him every morning since Josh learned to walk. Before that, it was his crying that would wake Gus. Gus would go over to his crib, and as soon as Josh saw him he would stop crying and start babbling at him. Little faker. Later on, it was an incessant "Dadadadadadada" that would have Gus going over to his crib at the crack of dawn. Holding on to the crib railing, Josh would grin at him and bounce there in his footie pajamas until Gus picked him up.

These days Josh let him sleep later but not without consequences. When Gus first started at the restaurant, Josh's attempts at cooking would have to be cleaned up. Not being allowed to go near the stove or the microwave or use knives, Josh just mixed random things.

"Do you want to try it?" he would ask, an eager look on his face.

Thank God he was mostly over that obsession.

After a quick visit to the bathroom, Gus went in search of Josh.

"What is this?" Gus asked seeing his old CD's arranged into a tower in the middle of the living room. It was a dangerously crooked structure. All over the carpet, action figures were perched around it in different poses.

"Just Joshing around," Josh said proudly. His great-grandfather had taught him that phrase. Now Josh used it every chance he got.

"Are you going to put them all back?" Gus said of the CD's.

"Not yet. I need them," Josh said. That's when the CD tower crashed.

"And I need coffee," Gus said leaving Josh to deal with the disaster.

Josh was telling his action figures, "Watch out, guys. Oh, no. You got crushed. Don't worry. I'll save you."

Gus expected Josh would eventually put away the CD's, putting the ones that had fallen out into the wrong cases, of course. Good thing the days of CD's were over. Gus only held on to them for sentimental reasons. It was a collection he and his brother, Liam, had put together and fought over when they were kids.

With Liam living in New Zealand, married with kids of his own, Gus hardly ever saw him. The last time Liam visited the US, he had seen that Gus still had the CD collection and he had laughed. It was also the first time he had met Josh. Josh had taken to him right away because Liam was loud and funny.

Seeing Josh, Liam said, "He's a Dwyer, all right."

Josh might not be a Dwyer by blood, but he was in his heart. He had that indomitable Dwyer spirit that drove Liam all over the world until a New Zealand girl finally made him settle down. The same spirit only drove Gus up the corporate ladder until Josh came along. That's when he found out what it meant to be a Dwyer, specifically Gus Dwyer.

Gus had felt something inside him awaken at the fateful moment when he asked Suzanne to have the baby she was carrying. She didn't want a child, and Gus realized that he did. He asked her to have the baby so he could adopt him. It had been a leap as great as flying to the ends of the world, and the reward was the best thing he could imagine – a beautiful little son, who got into everything, made a big mess, and filled his heart with joy.

This morning, while Gus's back was turned, Josh decided to spruce up his cereal with M&M's.

"M&M's don't go in cereal," Gus said, taking the bag away from him after a few of them made it in and sank to the bottom of the cereal bowl. "See? They can't swim."

"Don't worry. I'll save you guys," Josh said as he fished them out from the bottom and ate them.

"You call that saving them?"

Josh nodded and grinned.

"No more sneaking M&M's into your cereal," Gus told him.

Saturdays and Sundays, Gus went in to work later. He and Josh usually put in only a few hours. Wednesday was Gus's only full day off for now. Though it cut into their weekend, Josh liked going to the bistro so it wasn't a

major sacrifice.

As Gus drove to the bistro with Josh, he wondered if there was any chance that Jack would be there again today. He tried hard not to look forward to Jack coming to the bistro to look over his shoulder. Jack was definitely a mixed blessing.

"The big boss is here," Leroy said when he saw Gus coming in. He pointed a thumb toward Gus's office. He and Alfonso were busy unpacking some crates by the delivery entrance.

"You mean me," Gus said. He was still Leroy's boss as far as he knew.

"No. I mean the big boss," Leroy said, keeping a straight face. Alfonso grinned though.

Gus went into the office while Josh lingered to watch them opening up the crates, wanting to see what was inside. Leroy had a good eye so Gus had put him in charge of checking over the deliveries so they wouldn't get shorted or otherwise screwed over by the suppliers like they used to.

"Sure you can use my desk," Gus said when he saw Jack sitting there already, though not in his chair, on the opposite side.

"I needed somewhere to work," Jack said pointing to the other desk.

Josh's desk was clearly unavailable. It was covered with stuff that was supposed to keep Josh busy and out of Gus's hair while he worked. Papers and crayons were buried under toys, and Josh's drawings were tacked up above the desk.

"You were here when I left yesterday. Don't tell me you were here all night," Gus said as he cleared Josh's crayons and toys from the smaller desk.

"I'm not that much of a workaholic. But I did come in early," Jack said.

"You didn't find something wrong with our books, did you?" Gus asked, seeing what he was looking at on his laptop.

"No. Just going over everything. I'm mostly evaluating your procedures. I want to change a few things and update some of the software," Jack said.

"Not updates. I hate updates. Something always gets screwed up," Gus grumbled while Jack moved his laptop to the desk Gus had cleared for him.

Jack looked up at his whining. "I'll walk you through it, and it will make things easier in the end." Jack said. "You big baby" was implied.

Josh came in just then. "It was artichokes," he said of the crates he had seen them unpacking. "Leroy gave them a thumbs up." Josh demonstrated the slow thumbs up that was Leroy's trademark.

"Hello," Jack said, surprised to see him.

"Hello!" Josh told him as he dropped his book bag on the floor. The noise it made revealed that it held more toys than books today.

"You're here again," Jack said.

"You're here again too. Saturday is a workday for me and Dad," Josh said.

"We're glad to see you too," Gus told Jack, who didn't look a hundred percent pleased to see Josh.

"That's the homework desk. Are you doing homework?" Josh asked seeing that Jack was sitting at his usual place.

"No. Just work," Jack told him.

"Josh, you can sit over here," Gus told him pointing out the other side of his desk, where Jack had been sitting before.

"You said I couldn't sit there because I was too distracting," Josh reminded him.

"Jack is distracting too," Gus said though he meant it in a completely different way.

"Does he make faces at you?" Josh asked.

"Kind of."

Jack gave them a look over his shoulder but said nothing.

After a little while, Josh handed Gus some of his homework and he looked it over.

"You should check over what he's doing too," Josh said pointing at Jack.

"Actually, he is checking over what I'm doing," Gus told him. "Ready for a snack?" he asked Josh.

"Yes. He should have one too," Josh said, pointing at Jack again.

"You know, Jack is not your playmate. He's kind of my boss," Gus reminded him.

"Kind of?" Jack said, finally speaking up.

Gus smiled at him. "Want a snack?"

Josh nodded at Jack to encourage him to say yes.

"No, thank you," Jack said and turned back to his work.

When Jack was getting ready to leave, Gus decided to walk him out. He wanted to settle the issue of Josh coming to work with him.

"I can see you disapprove of every day being bring your son to work day. I hope you're not going to make trouble for me," Gus said as they stepped into the parking lot in the back.

"I just don't think it's ideal to have him here so often," Jack said.

"Ideal? What does ideal have to do with raising a kid?" Gus said.

"I wouldn't know," Jack said in a tight voice and started to walk away.

Gus got a weird vibe from him at that moment, but he didn't feel like he could ask him about it. Jack definitely had issues with kids. Too bad, Gus thought as he watched him walk to his rental. That didn't mean Jack was a total loss. A body like that couldn't be allowed to go to waste. They could still fool around if Gus ever managed to break through his hard shell.

Chapter 3

Later that day, Doug poked his blond head into Gus's office and looked around furtively. Gus stopped what he was doing to stare at his supposed other boss.

"They said he was gone. He is gone, right? They weren't messing with me?" Doug said as he still looked around for any sign of Jack.

"I thought you were just being irresponsible, but you're deliberately avoiding Jack," Gus realized.

"You met him, and you still ask me that?" Doug said, coming into the office properly.

Doug wasn't very tall, but he was a muscle-bound hottie. When he had seen the blond hunk for the first time, Gus thought he looked damn tasty. Then, disappointingly, he found out Doug was straight. Just as well since he was so fickle.

To be fair, Doug did give off a confusing vibe. Gus wasn't the first person to be surprised that he was straight. He dressed to show off his body and preferred bright colors most straight guys would avoid. The daring colors looked gorgeous on him, highlighting his coloring, especially his stunning, blue eyes. Women couldn't keep their hands off him.

Doug used to be the sole owner of Walnut Lane Bistro and Gus's boss in name only. Gus owed his job at the bistro to his college friend Brenda. Brenda was also Doug's cousin and frustrated accountant. Doug was a young entrepreneur, maybe too young. He had deep pockets and liked purchasing a new investment, but he didn't want to be involved in running it. There was no fun in that. He bought the bistro and then ignored the day to day operations. A good investment soon turned into a disaster. Brenda told Doug to either sell the place or get it straightened out.

Considering how Doug conducted business, it was no surprise that he drove the cautious and serious Brenda up the wall. She arranged for Gus and Doug to meet. She saw in Gus the solution to Doug's problems at the bistro and for Gus just the job he was looking for. After meeting Doug, Gus had the perfect job which allowed him to spend time with Josh.

Doug's hands-off approach suited Gus just fine, but it also left the bistro with major problems. The previous manager had been using Doug's lack of interest in the details to embezzle from him. Not wanting to bother with legal action, Doug just fired him and hired Gus. The problem was Gus didn't know anything about running a restaurant. He knew business, but he had only eaten in restaurants and washed dishes in a small diner when he was in high school. Doug didn't care about Gus's lack of experience. He was desperate, and his main concern was entrusting the place to someone the uptight, uncompromising Brenda had vouched for wholeheartedly.

Taking over a troubled business, Gus had to learn fast. He focused on the basics. He got the place cleaned up and cleaned up the staff too. A few of them had taken their cue from the previous manager and lacked both honesty and a decent work ethic.

The two chefs stayed though Gus wasn't sure about their skills. As he focused on everything else, he noticed that the food that the kitchen was putting out had improved without him having to do anything about it. Under new management, Linc and Rachel, the two head chefs, took their jobs more seriously. The food was now consistently good, not hit and miss like before. Gus was glad they had stepped up like that. Since Gus cooked at a level that only satisfied a six-year-old, he stayed out of their way.

Things had been going pretty smoothly since those early days, but now there was a new issue to deal with – Jack. Gus had a feeling Doug wouldn't be much help with that.

"Where's that gap-toothed kid who's always hanging around here?" Doug asked, not seeing Josh.

"Abby took him on a movie excursion some moms and dads organized for a bunch of kids from our neighborhood."

"Abby. Mmm," Doug said.

Gus hoped she wouldn't be back while he was still there to hit on her. She was a college student who had been babysitting Josh for years and probably the only woman in the universe who was immune to Doug's charms.

"Try and keep your mind on business for two minutes. You partnered up with your stepbrother, and now you don't want to deal with him so you dumped him on me," Gus said as Doug sat down and put his feet up on his desk.

"Don't hate him already. You barely met the man," Doug objected.

"I know he hates kids. That's not in his favor."

"Not really. It's about something else," Doug said and gave Gus a sideways look.

"Are you being mysterious?" Gus asked him.

"I'm not sure I should tell you." Doug put on a fake guarded look.

"Whatever."

"Don't act like you're not dying to know all his secrets."

"Tell me or shut up about it," Gus told him.

"OK. When he was younger, Jack was still going with girls. This one girl got pregnant so he married her. She had the baby, a little girl that Jack adored. Then his wife wanted out of the marriage, and she revealed that Jack wasn't the father. His best friend was. Jack loved that kid. The wife and the so-called best friend took her away, out of the country. Jack's heart got ripped out and stomped on. That's when he turned so cold. He doesn't trust anyone. He doesn't open up to anyone."

"Ouch. That's what happens when you mess with the opposite sex," Gus said.

"Be flippant about it. I'm sure Jack will appreciate that," Doug told him, like he was anyone to talk.

"I'm not. Believe me. If anyone ever tried to take Josh away from me... I

can't even..." Gus just shook his head to chase away that thought and the awful feeling that followed. "You guys haven't been stepbrothers long. Were you around for all that?"

"Nope. That was before my mom married his dad. I was against it, by the way. When my mom met him, Alex Velarde was a lot like Jack is now. He turned standoffish when Jack's mother died, left Jack with the nannies while he traveled for business. Jack and his dad are the same type, I guess. When their hearts break, they close themselves off. Alex did cheer up a little when he met my mom. You got to love it when money marries money. He's still a hardass though."

"How long ago was it when all this happened with Jack's daughter?" Gus asked since he was more interested in Jack than the rest of the family.

"Two years ago. Jack was barely out of college when he married and had the kid."

"What a terrible blow that must have been," Gus said, realizing how young Jack had been and still was. He was only twenty-six or so, a little older than Doug. Young or not, Jack held Gus's current and future employment prospects in his hands. "So how much should I worry about your new business partner? Should I polish up my resume?" Gus asked.

"No way! Don't even think about it. Jack loves your work. He sees what you did with this place. He wants to model another investment after the way you did things here," Doug told him.

"I didn't do much. I just straightened out a few things."

"The place is making a steady profit. That's the main thing."

"You're sure I'm not fired?" Gus asked, not trusting Doug's assurances.

"Definitely not. Didn't you hear me? The man is impressed with you."

"I wasn't feeling the love," Gus said.

"He's just uptight. The most important thing to him is numbers, and you have that going on."

Having delivered the good news, Doug was ready to go when Josh ran in.

"I saw your car!" he said as he ran up to Doug. Who could fail to spot a bright yellow Lamborghini in the parking lot?

"Wish I could give you a spin, but I have places to go, babes to see. Speaking off, what did you do with Abby? Where is she?" Doug asked Josh.

"She dropped me off," Josh said, but at his age, he was more interested in the car. "When I get my driver's license, can I drive your car?"

"Sure. But wouldn't you rather fly a plane like Jack?"

"Can I?" Josh asked.

"Don't ask me. I don't have a plane," Doug said. "Jack used to have one, just a little two-seater, but he crashed it. He's lucky to be alive."

Hearing this, Josh paled and stared at Doug wide-eyed. "A plane crash is really bad," Josh gasped looking from Doug to Gus.

Gus was ready to wring Doug's neck for scaring Josh like that. Since his great-grandfather died, natural disasters made Josh worry as did plane crashes.

Gus had never warned Doug about that, but obviously he should have.

"Josh, you just saw Jack earlier today. He's fine," Gus reminded him.

"The crash was almost two years ago," Doug said, trying to repair the damage.

"That's a long time ago," Gus rephrased for Josh's benefit. It calmed his fears to know that bad things only happened long ago or far away.

Josh looked uncertain then said, "OK. But he never smiles." Turning back to Doug, he asked, "Does Jack ever smile?"

"No," Doug said.

"Will he smile if I tickle him?" Josh asked and made spidery, tickling motions with his hands.

"Yes. Definitely," Doug said, trying to make more trouble.

"No," Gus told Josh. "I mean, he might, but don't."

"What if I tell him a joke?" Josh asked.

"Go ahead and try it," Gus said, seeing no harm in that.

"OK." Josh went over to Gus's desk and handed him his phone. "Call him so I can tell him a joke," he said when Gus did nothing.

"Not now. Save it for next time you see him."

Josh grumbled with impatience, but then he said, "OK. That will give me time to think of a really good joke."

"You'll have to if you want it to work," Gus told him.

"I know some good ones," Doug said.

Gus could just imagine. "No, you don't. You need to go sit down with Jack. You two need to be on the same page. Man up, you've avoided him long enough."

"But he'll try to make me do work," Doug complained.

"There isn't a man alive who could get you to do work," Gus told him as he left. Between the two of them, he was more worried about Jack having to deal with Doug.

But seeing Josh poking around his office, Gus had another concern. After what Doug had told him about Jack and his daughter, Gus worried about how hard it might be for him to be around Josh. Josh was a joy to Gus, but to Jack, he might be a very painful reminder of what he lost.

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Saturday night, Jack was shocked to get a phone call from Doug asking him to meet him for drinks. Since Jack had come to town, they had only spoken on the phone. Even then Doug couldn't wait to hang up rather than hear about the details of business at the bistro.

"Gus cracked the whip and made me do it," Doug admitted when Jack finally got to see him in person.

They were sitting in the lounge area of a swanky bar where Doug felt right at home, but Jack didn't. Every few seconds Doug waved or blew kisses

at someone he knew. Jack shouldn't have let him choose their meeting place.

"I'm glad someone has some influence over you," Jack said though he wasn't sure if he should be grateful to Gus or not.

"So you like Gus, huh? I knew you would," Doug said reading way too much into what Jack said. "He used to be kind of like you, a little bit cutthroat."

"Doug, I'm pretty sure there's no such things a little bit cutthroat," Jack told him. The description certainly didn't fit the Gus he had met.

"There is when we're talking about Gus. Cousin Brenda is an old college friend of his. According to her, Gus was ambitious, driven, a man on the rise, then bam! His best friend turned up preggers and dropped a baby in his lap. That's when Gus became a changed man and a full on daddy. He jumped off that ladder he was climbing and into my welcoming arms."

As Doug spread his muscular arms, an image of Gus and Doug embracing flashed through Jack's mind. It set his teeth on edge. Without meaning to, Jack glowered at Doug so intensely that Doug drew back. He felt the need to reassure Jack. "Gus is only the manager of my bistro, nothing more. Our bistro. But I think it's a little too soon for you to be this scary possessive of our shared, valued employee."

"I am only interested in Gus professionally," Jack said. It was just like Doug to assume everyone was as unprofessional as he was.

"Aha. That look was pure murder," Doug told him. "For future reference, please remember I'm straight."

"I will if you will." Jack had seen more guys hit on Doug than had ever hit on him.

"I have flair and the women love me for it." Doug smoothed down the front of his tight, lavender t-shirt.

Jack only sighed as he wondered about the life Gus had chosen for himself. His life had taken the opposite path from Jack's. Jack now lived for business as Gus once did, if Doug was to be believed. So far, Jack had only seen the Gus whose life was about his son. He even brought him to work, excessively from what Jack could tell.

Still he couldn't blame him. Gus had what Jack lost, and he obviously knew its value. No amount of money Jack could make would ever compare to that. But Jack also knew that the loss of every single penny he owned would be like a bee sting compared to the pain of having one's child taken away. That's why Jack was determined to stick with making money. A child's hands were too small. They couldn't hold on to his heart and keep it safe.

Chapter 4

Next day Jack went to Walnut Lane Bistro again. He wanted to see the

workings of the place as much as possible. He definitely wanted to see what kind of business they did on Sundays and what kind of customers they attracted. This time Jack wasn't surprised when Josh ran into the office ahead of his father. He was acting a little differently than before though. He came up to Jack and stared hard at him.

"OK," he said and let out a big breath as if he was relieved for some reason.

Jack turned from Josh to Gus, looking for an explanation.

"I told you he was fine. That was a long time ago," Gus said to his son before he addressed Jack. "Doug told him about the crash-landing of your plane, so he got worried."

"About me?" Jack asked.

"You're very important to Josh as an object of curiosity," Gus told him with a grin. "He just needed to see for himself that you were OK. This morning he was anxious that you might not be here." Smiling down at him, Gus ruffled his son's hair then smoothed it down again.

"But you are here," Josh said to Jack. "Good for you. But you shouldn't fly any more planes until you learn how," Josh told him. Gus cracked up behind him.

Jack thought Josh might be finished with him, but that wasn't the end of it. While Josh drew at his father's desk, every now and then he would come up with an urgent question for Jack about what he liked to eat, what kind of car he had, whether Jack had a dog.

"No."

"Me either," Josh said with a sigh that came from the depths of his soul.

"I told you it's not fair to leave a dog alone all day," Gus told him defensively.

"I know," Josh said with a pout.

"Now give it a rest with all the questions," his father told him.

"But..."

Gus said what he had already told Josh many times already, "Don't bother people when they're working."

"But Dad..."

"And that includes me," Gus said as Josh squirmed in his chair.

It seemed to take superhuman effort for Josh to hold back everything he had to ask. He pressed his lips together and looked like he would explode if he kept his curiosity bottled up. It didn't take him long to sneak over to Jack's desk.

"Joshua!" Gus said seeing Josh looking over Jack's shoulder as he worked.

Josh jumped. "Not my long name," he whined.

"What did I tell you about bothering Jack?"

"I was helping him," Josh claimed.

Gus looked at him in disbelief. "Sure. Go sit where you're supposed to."

"He isn't that much trouble," Jack said, seeing Josh trudge over to his father's desk unhappily.

"Are you sure you want to encourage him?" Gus asked.

Jack wouldn't go that far, but he hated to see Josh scolded on his behalf.

A little later, when Jack went to check out the efficiency of the work in the kitchen, Gus came along.

"Every time we hire someone, Josh has to know everything about them. That doesn't mean you have to indulge him. I'll try and keep him out of your hair," Gus said to him.

As Gus spoke while leaning next to him, Jack noticed a difference in Gus's attitude from the day before. He seemed more solicitous, almost sympathetic about Jack's reaction to his son. At the same time, Gus was trying to act casual, something that came naturally to him until now. The fact that he had spoken to Doug the day before, and the look Gus gave him as he turned away, made Jack realize that he knew about Gina.

"What did Doug tell you?"

Gus turned to face him and took Jack's angry look without flinching. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want your pity," Jack snapped though he hadn't meant to. He wanted to stay cool and dismiss the subject without further discussion.

"Look, I'm a father..." Gus started to say, but Jack cut him off.

"That doesn't mean you understand anything about this."

"OK, but Doug wanted to try to make me understand you better. That's why he told me. And with both you and Josh here, it was something I needed to know. So for once, Doug did the right thing," Gus said decisively.

"That's why you've been putting more effort into keeping Josh away from me."

"I have to do that anyway. He never stops. He is a question machine. Plus he has taken a strong interest in you. Maybe he's taking his cue from me."

The apologetic grin Gus gave him was almost enough to disarm Jack. But he had felt Gus's interest already, and while it made his heart beat faster, it scared him too. He felt like he needed to push Gus back, not share intimate details of his life with him. For now he just walked away from him.

Hoping that Gus had gotten the message, Jack left for a meeting. He drove yet another rented car, letting the GPS guide him to his destination. For a second he thought about what it would be like to know these streets, to have a favorite place to eat and shop. Instead of going to a hotel room, at the end of the day he would go home. He stopped himself right before he imagined who might be waiting there for him. With a tight grip on the wheel, he steeled himself against those kinds of longings. He had chosen this life for a reason. He didn't want to get to know a place or the people, and he didn't want to get attached to any of them.

When it was close to Gus's quitting time, Jack came back just in time for Josh to latch onto him again. He could have easily waited to return after they left, but then Gus might think he was avoiding him and his son. Gus might already have that impression. Jack's earlier meeting might have looked like an escape to him. Now Jack deliberately gave Josh his attention.

"Dad is making dinner. We only had a little at family meal because we have chicken legs and chicken wings at home. Those are the best parts. But chicken nuggets are good too. Which kind of chicken do you like?" Josh asked.

"Legs are good," Jack said noncommittally.

"Yey! You can help us eat them," Josh said then he turned to his father. "He can help us eat them. We have lots." Josh peered at Jack waiting for an answer.

"Maybe he's busy," Gus said to help out Jack, who found himself at a loss as to how to refuse such an eager child's invitation.

"Even if he's busy, he still has to eat dinner," Josh said reasonably. "Look how skinny he is."

"He isn't that skinny," Gus said but he couldn't keep a straight face.

"No, he's skinny," Josh insisted to his father before turning to Jack. "You aren't going to try to skip dinner again, are you?" Josh asked and frowned at him sternly.

"I'll make sure to eat something," Jack promised him.

"You know this is a restaurant, right?" Gus said to Josh, but that didn't stop him.

"I know, but he should come home with us. We have lots of chicken legs and chicken wings, and mashed potatoes from a box."

"I'm sure Jack is dying to have mashed potatoes from a box," Gus said with an ironic smile.

Josh nodded, taking his words at face value. "They are good. So you'll come?" Josh said like he was fully expecting a yes.

"Josh," Gus said to him, putting a note of warning into his voice that Jack didn't like.

At his tone, both Josh and Jack turned to him.

"I'll be happy to join you," Jack said, surprising Gus and making Josh jump with joy.

As he looked at Jack, Gus was obviously wondering why he said yes. Jack wondered the same thing himself.

Gus and Josh had already left – Gus with a questioning look in his eyes, Josh with a big smile. Jack had directions to their house and planned to join them later.

By saying yes, it was almost like he had responded to some kind of unspoken dare. In a way he had. He just couldn't bear to have Gus look at him

with pity. To top it off, Gus assumed Jack was such a snob that he would turn up his nose at instant mashed potatoes.

All day Gus had tried to protect him from Josh. It was as if Gus thought Jack was some fragile, emotional wreck who needed to be shielded from a six-year-old. Of course saying yes just to prove him wrong was weak-minded and impulsive on Jack's part, so he wasn't sure what he was proving exactly.

Stupidly determined to prove to Gus that being around him and his son had no effect on him, Jack was now on his way to their house for dinner. What an idiot. Of course being around Josh and Gus affected him. He was a fool to deny it to himself and to try to prove something to Gus, a man he barely knew and wouldn't know for more than a few weeks.

Jack made it a point never to stay anywhere for long. His investments were scattered all over the country and abroad, and that's how he liked it. He wanted to keep on the move. It wasn't the healthiest way to deal with things, but he didn't care. He might not be able to outrun the pain of losing Gina, but it couldn't settle inside of him either when he had to juggle travel, hotels, cars, and the various businesses he was overseeing.

And now look at him driving into the suburbs with a wine bottle on the passenger seat. He was going to sit at the dinner table with a little boy bubbling over with questions and opinions, and his dad, a man who pitied Jack but more often looked at him like he wanted to see him naked and on his knees.

Chapter 5

When Jack parked on the street at the address Gus had given him, he saw a brick house with a driveway leading to a carport to one side. As he got out with the bottle of wine in hand, Jack went up the path to the front door. The same reddish bricks that made up the house had been laid down to make the path. The front of the house was dominated by a big picture window framed by shrubs on the bottom and on the sides. They had been trimmed to leave the window clear. It was a pleasant but ordinary house.

Before Jack could knock, Josh swung the door wide and grinned at him.

"Wipe your feet," he said.

"I could take my shoes off," Jack offered seeing Gus poke his head out of a doorway to greet him more properly.

"No," Josh said. "Your feet might be stinky."

Gus laughed. "Don't let that little tyrant boss you around," he said to Jack as he took the wine from him and smiled after reading the label. "Come on in. We are sitting on the porch. It's through here." Gus motioned him into the kitchen.

Jack passed a living room and a small dining room. Gus led the way through a messy, old-fashioned kitchen with a set of sliding glass doors in its breakfast nook. The kitchen appliances were mismatched – a beige fridge, a black dishwasher and a white stove, no stainless steel here. The cabinets were solid wood but old, and worn around the handles.

"Sorry we decided to prioritize food over cleaning up," Gus said of the sink full of dishes and the crumbs on the countertop.

"We?" Jack said. For a moment he envisioned a boyfriend that Gus had never mentioned before.

"Josh and I. Josh is a good worker unless he gets distracted."

Out the back doors, Jack could see the wood railing of the porch and a grill smoking away. Beyond that was a lawn that stretched to the wooden fence. The lawn was as smooth and featureless as a playing field. Stepping outside, Jack saw striped lounge chairs, a small table and a cooler.

On the other side of the porch was a sort of storage area where an adult's and a child's bicycle were leaning against the railing. There was a soccer ball, a basketball and a scooter. Everywhere Jack turned there were signs of an active, happy childhood. The biggest sign was Josh himself and his big smile. He chattered away like there wasn't enough time in the world for him to say everything he wanted to tell Jack.

"Show Jack your soccer moves," Gus said as he threw the soccer ball out onto the lawn. Jack could tell he did it to stop the incessant flow of words. Gus handed Jack a beer from the cooler filled with ice, and told him, "He'll calm down. He's always a little hyper when people first arrive. Kind of like a puppy."

The two of them sat in the lounge chairs and watched Josh as he chased the ball around while flailing his arms. He was huffing and a little overheated when Gus called him over for dinner and handed him a chilled box of juice. Seeing he was a little sweaty, Gus pushed the hair off his face.

The table outside was too small, so they headed inside to have dinner. As they went in, Jack saw that it was chilly out and starting to get dark. He had been so focused on Josh's antics and absorbed by the strange feeling of sitting next to Gus. Listening to the honeyed, deep quality in Gus's voice, Jack had not felt the early spring cold or seen the darkness coming on.

Going in, Jack had a chance to see more of the house. He had already noticed the traditional furnishings throughout. It suited the older house, which hadn't seen much updating from what Jack could tell. There were photographs everywhere. The dining room sideboard was covered with them. The dining table was set with a thick, simple set of brown plates except for Josh's place. Seeing that his place was set with a plate with Iron Man on it, Josh objected, "I want a grown up plate too."

"Next you'll want your own glass of wine," Gus said as he handed Jack the wine to open, and he went to switch out Josh's plate.

When they all sat down, Gus ladled out the mashed potatoes and Josh

rubbed his hands excitedly.

"I considered making the real thing," Gus said to Jack. "But then I remembered why I don't. If I take the time to make real mashed potatoes, the chicken will burn. So welcome to our house, Jack. Enjoy the good wine and the boxed mashed potatoes."

"I will," Jack told him. "I used to eat them all the time when I was in college. They were a specialty... of a friend of mine." Jack took a sip of wine and looked down at his food to cover up that hesitation. He tried to suppress the memories that threatened to flood back with the first taste of what Bruce had often mixed up, heating the water in an electric teapot. When they were too busy studying to go out for real food, it wasn't so bad. For a moment, their dorm room was so vivid in his mind, and he could hear Bruce's laugh.

After another sip of wine, Jack took a bite of the chicken, which had been brushed with barbeque sauce for the last ten minutes of cooking.

"It's good," Jack said raising his eyes to Gus.

Disconcertingly, he found that Gus was looking at him as if all this time he had been reading his mind. For a second Jack felt like all his memories stood exposed to him. He felt as if Gus was standing next to him the first time Jack shook hands with Bruce and also the last time he saw him, when Bruce was holding his daughter's tiny hand, telling her to wave goodbye and leading her out of Jack's life forever.

"Dad is a great cook," Josh piped up, breaking the spell. His face was already smeared with barbeque sauce. "He could cook at the bistro, but Linc and Rachel would yell at him all the time because he's too slow. 'Hustle, man, you're putting us in the weeds!'" Josh said, doing a passable impression of Lincoln Brown, one of their head chefs.

Laughing, Gus reached over and wiped his son's face with a napkin.

"I'll just get dirty again," Josh told him.

After they were done eating, and Josh was stuffing his face with brownies, Jack looked over at the photos on the sideboard. There was one of Josh being held up between Gus and another man. Jack's first thought was that the man was a boyfriend and he frowned.

"That's my brother, Liam, when he came for a visit. He lives in New Zealand," Gus said then he pointed out some of the other photos of his brother. "That's him with his wife and daughters. And that's the two of us when we were kids. I was the brains. He was the brawn."

"If you do say so yourself," Jack said. It was true that Gus's brother was very brawny. That's why Jack hadn't made the right connection between them.

"Oh, I definitely say so. Liam is like our dad. There is no problem he wouldn't try to solve with a hammer and duct tape. Duct tape to put together whatever he smashed up with the hammer. If anything stopped working, his solution was just hit it. If that didn't work, hit it harder."

Josh laughed with approval. Still looking at the pictures, Jack noticed

many photos of Gus and Josh with an old man.

"That's Pop Pop. He taught me everything I know," Josh said when he saw what Jack was looking at.

"Not everything. Give me some credit," Gus said. Then he told Jack, "That's my grandfather. I moved here to be close to him when he went into a nursing home in Oakville. With my parents living on the other side of the country, he had no family nearby. I wanted Josh to get to know him. And boy did he. They were inseparable. Granddad turned him into a little Pop Pop clone. Granddad took him everywhere, showing him off to all the other old people, using him to impress old ladies."

"I'm a chick magnet," Josh boasted.

"A fat lot of good that does me," Gus told him. "But chicks over eighty can't resist you."

"They can't. They love me," Josh said with a mouth full of brownie.

"How about a girl who still has her own teeth?" Gus said.

"I don't have my own teeth," Josh said pointing at the generous gap between his teeth which was kind of hard to miss as were the brownie crumbs stuck all over his face.

Gus noticed that he had polished off his brownies. "Hey, goofball, go wash your face."

"Smile when you say that, mister," Josh told him.

"Is that something his great-grandfather taught him?" Jack wondered since it sounded old-fashioned to him.

Gus confirmed it. "Yes. Granddad used to say some version of that. Such a crazy old man."

"Pop Pop was a good kind of crazy," Josh said.

"Is that his great-grandfather again?" Jack asked as Josh ran out of the dining room to go wash his face.

"No. He was quoting me. That old man surprised me. He was supportive when I came out, unlike my parents. He said, 'I don't get what it's all about. Give me pussy any day of the week. Even wrinkled old pussy will do in a pinch. But I'm sure you know what gets you churning butter, and that's fine with me.' He also did a little hip bump when he said that thing about butter. Ugh. I almost turned into a eunuch right then and there."

"Then why did you repeat it?" Jack asked since it had a similar effect on him.

"To share the pain." Gus turned more serious. "He died a little while ago. That was rough. But sometimes, I hear my granddad's words coming out of my kid's mouth. It's nice. It's like he's still here. Josh carries him around with him, reminds me of him every chance he gets."

This was the first time Jack had seen that Gus had suffered a recent loss. He was such a positive person, always ready to smile and laugh, especially at Jack, but then he had that little boy to call his own. Jack envied him.

Jack stayed even after Josh reluctantly went to bed. Though he knew he should leave, Jack just couldn't pull himself away from Gus. There was something about Gus's easygoing, almost intimate manner that drew Jack in. He had a sense of tingling familiarity, like Gus was someone he had known long ago when things were brighter, when sunlight sparkled in his eyes, and his heart was full of love and trust. The feeling sneaked up on him and made his heart beat too fast and loud.

He and Gus sat in the living room and slowly finished the wine. All around were signs of family life, a life lived in happy disorder. By the front door, Josh's shoes looked like they were hurriedly taken off. His familiar blue and red jacket hung askew from a hook. His book bag, which to Jack always looked too heavy, was on the floor leaning against the side of the couch. More photos covered every surface. A number of them were from New Zealand.

"I'm dying to take Josh over there when he's a little older. He would get such a kick out of it," Gus said as he gazed at a picture of his brother holding his daughters, one in each arm. Behind them waves crashed and you could see surfers and sailboats.

Gus drew his attention to another photo. "That's Suzanne, Josh's mother."

Jack saw a very sophisticated looking blonde with a subdued smile. Her eyes were blue-gray, but they were not the smiling eyes Josh had.

Gus told him about her. "We worked together. We were rivals and best friends. At one time, we were so in tune, hungry, driven to succeed. But then our paths diverged. Suzanne got pregnant after what she called a stupid one night stand in Cozumel. As soon as she found out she was pregnant, she decided to have an abortion. She didn't want a child, maybe not ever. She talked to me about it. It made her sad, but she was sure. I don't know how I had the courage to do it, but I asked her to consider having the baby for me, so I could adopt him. She had to think about it, but she agreed. That's how I got Josh." Gus looked surprised even now.

"Is your friend a part of Josh's life?" Jack asked.

"No. She took a job in San Diego. She said staying here and watching Josh grow up would be too weird for her. After she moved, she hardly even stayed in touch. I made sure to stay in touch with her though. She gave me so much. I couldn't just let her slip away."

"What if the man who fathered Josh asserted his parental rights?" Jack couldn't help asking. To him it was a grim, terrifying thought, but Gus didn't look too troubled.

"Suzanne assured me that he would never be a problem, and I trust her," Gus said.

"Weren't you worried that once the baby was born, she might want to keep him?" Jack asked, he couldn't help dwelling on all the pitfalls.

"I tried to be prepared for that," Gus said. "It didn't happen. She was sure. She didn't even want to hold him. She said she was happy for me, and that the

baby was in good hands. I'm so grateful to her."

"I'm glad things worked out for you," Jack said. He was a little in awe of Gus for taking such a leap. He wondered if Gus knew how much heartbreak he had risked, how shattered he would have been if everything hadn't worked out right. Jack could still hear Nancy telling him, "Gina isn't yours. I slept with Bruce even after he got married. He's Gina's father. I'm sorry."

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Gus watched Jack as he stared off into space in the grip of something that made his dark eyes look unbearably sad. He wasn't surprised. Gus had what Jack had lost. What Gus told him must have brought back some piece of his unlucky past. It did the same for Gus, but his memories were happy ones.

Still, he had to admit there were so many terrifying feelings that followed when one let love into their hearts. Gus's joy was overlaid with terror at every moment he had been a father to Josh. It all started even before Josh was born. But holding him as a newborn had locked so many terrible feelings into Gus's heart. He knew he would never be the same man. At the moment Josh was born, a new Gus was born as well.

As Gus held him for the first time, Josh was so small and nearly weightless. He almost fit across the span of his hands, but he would grow fast. And boy did he cry in those first moments of his life, but then Gus's eyes weren't dry either. This tiny living thing he was holding, with its tiny, pink scrunched up face, was his now.

Gus spoke to his newborn son. "Haven't you had enough of crying? Don't you want to know who I am? Yeah, who's the stupid guy who's holding you? That's the guy who loves you more than anything, your dad, that's who. I'm your daddy and you're my baby boy. Nice to meet you," Gus said to him as tears streamed down his face. He smiled and laughed and cried and was in general just a big mess of a brand new dad.

That moment of terrifying discovery was something he and Jack must have shared. It was what came after that that put up this wall between them.

That's why Gus was surprised that Jack came over. Gus had seen a defiant look in Jack's eyes when he looked at Gus while accepting Josh's dinner invitation. It had seemed familiar, and it came to him when he had seen it before. He remembered that look from when they first met and shook hands. That's when he had first felt the electricity between them. Gus had assumed it was only on his part, but now he had reason to hope that it might be mutual.

He was almost sure that Jack said yes because he felt he had something to prove. If Jack needed to prove himself to Gus, maybe there was something there. That electricity Gus was feeling might be going both ways.

Now, by some miracle, Gus had Jack in his house, but he just had to ruin it.

"Tell me about that plane crash of yours," Gus said. He knew it was a

loaded question. It was the same as asking Jack to tell him all about his lost daughter. Gus had deliberately stayed away from that thorny subject, but that Dwyer outspokenness would not be reigned in for long.

"What about it?" Jack asked, already on his guard.

"That must have been something."

"It was just an error on my part."

"I guess I find the timing suspicious. So soon after you lost your daughter, you couldn't have been in the best frame of mind," Gus said.

"I think it's time for me to go." Jack stood up and set down his wine glass.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to push," Gus said as he walked him to the door.

Jack sighed. "Thank you for dinner."

"Thank you for letting Josh badger you into it."

"It was mostly a pleasant evening."

"Until I ruined it?"

"It's not ruined. But these things come to an end," Jack said and Gus was sure that he meant that as a reminder that he was in town temporarily, and nothing that started between them would last. Even hearing his warning, Gus still wanted to taste him, to risk a painful loss if he could just have him for a little while. He wanted to see passion bloom in his eyes. He wanted to see him come.

Chapter 6

Monday morning, Gus was getting to the office after dropping Josh at school. As he went in, he was surprised to see Jack there. Lingered in the doorway while Jack was turned away and too focused on the laptop screen to notice him, Gus took a moment to admire him. The way he was perfectly fitted into his clothes left no room for doubt, the man was trim and toned. His hair was always so neatly groomed. Gus wanted to go up to him and mess him up. But when didn't he want to do that these days. He stood there smiling until Jack noticed him.

"Yes, I am happy to see you," Gus admitted.

Jack looked down at his crotch. "Not that happy," he noted.

Gus laughed. He wouldn't have expected that from him.

"Undo a few buttons, and I'll see what I can do," Gus told him as he took a seat behind his desk. He couldn't spend all morning flirting with Jack, he had asses to kick.

"So you can be a hardass when you choose," Jack said after he heard Gus on the phone with a supplier that had suddenly turned unreliable.

"You better believe it," Gus said smugly.

"I'm surprised that, with your easygoing attitude, you've been able to whip

this place into shape."

"I'm full of surprises," Gus said more suggestively than he intended. He didn't mean to flirt with Jack so much. He just couldn't seem to help it. Gus knew that if Jack really minded the flirting, he would shut him down fast and hard.

"Doug did tell me you used to be cutthroat," Jack said.

"And you didn't believe him," Gus guessed. "People are always more than they seem."

"True," Jack said kind of bitterly.

Gus frowned at him, but he knew he couldn't broach a touchy subject so soon after last night's blunder which cost him Jack's company. It's not that he had expected Jack to spend the night, but their conversation could have easily dragged on into the night the way it did when there was an undeniable connection and two people just didn't want to tear themselves away from each other. Gus hoped he would get another opportunity to make Jack want to stay, and that he wouldn't screw it up next time.

*

After last night, Jack wasn't sure what to expect from Gus. Mostly he was his usual self, but just now Jack saw hesitation in his eyes. He could tell that Gus struggled with his natural inclination to say whatever was on his mind. That's where Josh must have gotten that tendency even if he wasn't related to Gus by blood.

As soon as he brought Josh from school, Gus was back on the phone again. While his father was busy, Josh eagerly watched yet another package being opened. When one of the line cooks, Angela, came by, Gus waved to her that it was OK to take Josh along with her.

"Where is that toothless little old man?" Gus asked after he got off the phone.

"Angela is showing him some new piece of equipment," Jack told him. He had seen Josh go into the kitchen along with a few members of staff.

"That's right. The new pasta machine must have arrived. I have to check that out. I love fresh pasta and Angela is a wiz. What about you? You want to see it?" Gus asked as he stood up from his desk.

"I know what they look like."

"Do you know what fun looks like?" Gus said.

Jack sighed then got up. He wasn't usually so susceptible to taunting, but he did want to see what all the fuss was about. After all he did own half of everything in the place.

When they got to the kitchen, Angela thanked Gus for the machine like it was a gift to her. Then she and Chef Rachel tried out the machine on a few different kinds of pasta. It was cooked and served for everyone to taste it and give their opinion.

Josh always said, "I'm not sure yet" and then asked for more with a big grin until Gus stopped him. Overall the staff didn't mind having Josh around, and a few like Angela even encouraged him to watch and learn. Jack had noticed that there was less cursing in this kitchen than some others he had visited. When someone let loose, usually after a mishap, Josh was delighted.

When they got to the office, Gus and Jack got busy with work and Josh with his homework. After a little while, Josh sneaked over to Jack to show him a drawing. It was a superhero, maybe Iron Man, with what looked like a bear next to him.

"You should draw something too," he said to Jack.

"You being a little pest again?" Gus asked him.

"Jack needs me to show him how to have fun," Josh said.

"I'll show him," Gus volunteered.

"Really, will you?" Josh asked.

"Maybe," Gus said with a wink at Jack.

Jack shook his head.

"Dad knows how to have fun," Josh assured Jack. "He's a heck of a guy. He's really a hell of a guy, but I'm not allowed to say hell."

"You just said it twice," Gus pointed out to him.

"What?" Josh asked, confused.

Gus shooed him away from Jack's desk. "Just because Jack is shiny and new doesn't mean you should interrupt him when he's doing his job."

Josh sighed.

"I guess he's bored," Jack said.

"He's supposed to be doing his homework. Get to it, mister," Gus said to Josh as they both sat across from each other at his desk.

Jack envied them both the luxury. Bringing your kid to work, being with your dad at work, neither one was something Jack ever experienced. Even when Jack used to work for his father, they never worked in the same building much less in the same office. He looked at Gus and Josh, their heads down over their work, mirror images of each other.

When it was time for them to go home, Josh came over to Jack's desk.

"Are you going to go home too?" he asked Jack.

"Not yet. I have some more work to do," Jack told him.

"He works too hard," Josh told Gus.

"Yes, he does," his father agreed.

Josh came over to peer at Jack. "You have to have fun too, not just work all the time. Right?" He turned to his dad for confirmation.

"Right."

"See. Dad knows," Josh said to Jack. "What are we going to do about him?" Josh asked his father.

"Maybe he's a hopeless case," Gus said with a shrug. He stood there with

his hands in his pockets, tossing a teasing smile at Jack.

"No, he's not!" Josh protested.

Jack couldn't help but smile.

"See, you got him to smile," Gus said, pointing at Jack.

Josh turned back to Jack who had gone serious again.

"I missed it!" Josh said.

"Maybe he'll do it again one of these days."

Josh stared at Jack waiting for another smile. Then he started making faces, and Jack couldn't help but smile again.

Josh clapped. "I did it!"

"OK. Time for us to go," Gus said.

"Can we go somewhere or do we have to go straight home?" Josh asked while looking up at his dad.

"Maybe we can stop somewhere on the way," Gus said.

"Can Jack come?" Josh asked.

"You want to join us?" Gus said to Jack.

Josh's face lit up. Jack was ready to say no as Gus expected him to, but Josh looked so hopeful. Jack knew he would be disappointed if he said no, so he came up with a compromise.

"OK," Jack said and Josh jumped and cheered.

Gus looked surprised but also happy.

"Now we have to come up with somewhere really good to take him," Gus said to Josh.

"You already had me over for dinner. I would like to take you guys somewhere," Jack told him.

Because of the booster seat, they took Gus's car. Jack gave him directions to a restaurant that he thought Josh might enjoy and that had been suggested to him as a possible investment. It didn't appeal to Jack, but a friend asked him to evaluate the potential of the place for profit and future growth.

"These days this place isn't in my price range," Gus said as they pulled into the parking lot of Gilbertina's. "But I was thinking of bringing Josh here for a special occasion."

"I hope this doesn't spoil your plans," Jack said, frowning.

"That kid can watch a movie a million times and still laugh at all the same stuff, so you don't need to worry about that," Gus assured him.

As they went in, Jack saw a full waiting area, and he had already seen a few groups of people waiting outside. Jack had made reservations so they only had to wait ten minutes to be seated. When they went inside, Gus raised his eyebrows at what he saw while Josh gasped with delight. The main feature of the place wasn't visible from the waiting area. An aquarium ran down the length of one wall from the entrance to the back of the house. Josh jumped excitedly when he saw it.

"Well this puts the bistro to shame," Gus said as Josh asked his permission to get closer.

There were already other children there so Gus told him to go ahead.

"I hope those aren't on the menu," Gus said of the fish swimming behind glass.

Josh was already absorbed in watching them. There were two sets of railings in front of the aquarium. They kept the kids, and a few adults who had gone to see the fish up close, separated from the rest of the dining room. The space between the second railing and the aquarium was filled with plants. The railing was just high enough for the smallest kids to see over but not to reach the aquarium glass.

"This place is amazing. We'll never get Josh to sit down and eat," Gus said. That was true of many other children there. They were all standing between the railings, entranced by the fish and other aquatic life. A few parents tried to get their attention without success.

Once he and Gus were seated, Jack took note of orders being taken at other tables. He wanted to see how long it took for them to be filled. He also paid attention to the guests' reactions to their food and to the service. Gus didn't miss what Jack was doing.

"I can see you timing the staff and calculating the overhead, you sneaky bastard. You're checking this place out. You're here on business," Gus said, glaring at him across the table.

Jack shrugged and smiled.

"You sneak," Gus told him.

"Consider it a compromise."

"No. I'm just going to consider you hopeless."

"Josh is having fun," Jack pointed out. He had joined some kids who were following a group of fish down the length of the aquarium.

"Well, sure. He doesn't know you brought us here under false pretenses." Gus shook his head but also smiled at Jack. "I should have known."

"We barely know each other. I should be able to pull a few over on you."

"I'm going to learn all your tricks," Gus vowed, narrowing his eyes at Jack.

His words made Jack's heart skip a beat. He made it sound like there was a future in which they would get to know each other better. It sent a shiver down his spine when he thought about spending time with Gus, getting close to him. He could deny it all he wanted, but he found Gus incredibly attractive.

To make Jack feel like this, Gus should have been better looking, better dressed, more accomplished. Instead, Gus was very ordinary and unbelievably magnetic despite that. Jack felt like he could catch glimpses of something bright and wonderful that Gus was promising him. All Jack had to do was stay close to him to see it whole and experience it.

With Josh busy looking at fish, Jack and Gus were alone at the table. That was something Jack hadn't counted on.

"I'm sorry I doubted you," Gus said with a smirk. "I see what you were doing now. It was nice of you to arrange this alone time for the two of us."

That was how it was working out. Jack felt like he had fallen into his own trap. He did make sure to keep the conversation strictly business. It didn't lessen Gus's appeal any. He looked at Jack in a way that said he would welcome Jack into his arms any time.

Whenever Gus looked over at what Josh was doing, which was frequently, Jack could look at him without having to meet his eyes. He tried to convince himself that Gus just wasn't that attractive, but instead he wanted to run his lips over the stubble on his cheek, push his fingers through his hair and seal his mouth with his own. Also, to determine just how unappealing Gus was, he would need to strip him naked and closely examine every inch of his body, lick and bite his way down to his cock.

As Jack tried to get his thoughts and his breathing under control, he realized that he had never felt so unsettled by anyone in his life. He just couldn't pinpoint how Gus had so much power over him. One thing was for certain, whenever Gus hit him with that look that mixed acceptance and longing, Jack felt like something inside him came undone. Some part of him responded to Gus and it wasn't only his cock. He had been attracted to Gus since he first saw him, but this feeling wasn't about Gus's body. Whatever the feeling was, it made spending time with Gus both wonderful and excruciating.

When Gus pointed out to him that it was late, Jack was surprised to see the time. They paid the check and collected Josh, who waved goodbye to the fish. After Jack surveyed both Gus and Josh about Gilbertina's, they drove back to the bistro where Jack's car was still parked. Josh never got a chance to eat so they had ordered him a mixed, grilled platter of meats and vegetables to go. While Josh ate his takeout in the back seat, Gus walked Jack a few feet to his car.

"Thank you for tonight. I had a good time. I hope we'll get to do this again soon," Gus said. He was deliberately making this sound like a date. It almost was since he and Gus had been alone at the table the whole time.

As Jack opened his car door, Gus stepped into his space and placed one hand on the hood of Jack's car. He was standing way too close, looking from Jack's eyes to his mouth. Jack felt dizzy with the nearness of him. He had the impression that if Josh wasn't just a few feet away, Gus would push Jack up against the car and kiss him. Instead he stepped back to let Jack get in then waved as Jack's car pulled out of the parking lot.

Driving away, Jack was suffused with the tension of being so close to having his mouth on Gus and his arms around him. The unrealized potential of that moment haunted him all the way back to his hotel. He felt that the night should have ended with a kiss and maybe more. It would have to end with Jack jerking off while thinking about Gus fucking him on the hood of his car.

Chapter 7

When he arrived at the bistro the next morning, Jack decided to put last night out of his mind. He hoped Gus would follow his lead and keep things professional.

"Did we have some unfinished business from last night?" Gus asked as soon as Jack walked into the office. So much for that.

Gus was sitting behind his desk. His eyes – which always seemed to be asking Jack to strip – were more lustful than ever. Jack felt as if he was back standing by his car with Gus so close, seemingly about to kiss him. Jack expected the spell of that moment to evaporate, not come back full force the second he saw him again.

Standing by the other desk in the office, Jack felt like no time had passed since then. Time stood still and Jack's heart stopped beating. He was suspended, waiting as Gus seemed determined to recreate the moment. Slowly, Gus got up from behind his desk. As he came toward him, Jack turned away and busied himself with some files. It wasn't long before he felt Gus right behind him. Gus stood so close that Jack only had to turn his head and he could be kissing him. Jack held his breath trying to summon the strength not to let this happen.

Seeing his struggle for control, Gus leaned even closer and whispered in his ear, "I can't be that hard to resist."

The closeness and the slight brush of Gus's lips against his earlobe made Jack shudder. He needed to pull away but he couldn't. It was as if the nearness of Gus's body was something he couldn't bear to lose. Gus sneaked his arm around his waist, gently guiding him to turn and face him. As if in a trance, Jack did just that.

Jack looked into his eyes and breathed in his crisp, clean, masculine scent just as Gus's mouth was on his. His arm around Jack's back and his hand on the back of his neck held Jack in place. Their mouths opened to one another, fluttering then firm, tongues probing, seeking each other's depths. Jack pressed in closer and felt Gus's hold on him tighten, the plunge into his mouth deepen. All of it combined into a long kiss that seem to stretch into an eternity of Gus's lips and tongue and the taste of mint. Gus ended the kiss breathless, leaning his head on Jack's shoulder.

"This is what I owe you from last night's date," Gus whispered.

"That wasn't a date," Jack said, still a little out of breath.

"Too late now, I just made it into a date," Gus claimed as he straightened and gave Jack a surprisingly serious look. "I knew you weren't going to make a move. I couldn't live with myself if I didn't," Gus said then he kissed him again. His mouth was hot but the kiss didn't last. "Just making sure you're as good a kisser as I thought you were," Gus said as he pulled back. Then he

kissed Jack again. "Double-checking."

Gus would have swooped in for another kiss, but Lillian, the sous chef, came in with some changes to the supply orders. They both tried to act more businesslike, but Jack noticed that Gus had to stare at what she was showing him for a minute or two before his eyes focused, and he could make any sense of it.

Jack was in a similar state. His head was swimming. He stared at the papers in front of him, but he had no idea what they were. All he could see was Gus's mouth, his lustful eyes and then he felt his mouth gliding over his, his tongue sinking in, and sparks going off inside him as his breath was stolen away.

Gus got busy after that, leaving Jack to wrestle with what just happened. It was more than any kiss before. It reached deeper. It ignited such a powerful need that it left Jack shaky and confused.

Jack was a little stunned that a kiss could do this to him. Maybe he just needed to get laid and nothing more. Except the only man he wanted right now was Gus. By being near him, this was what Jack had been risking and wanting. Kissing Gus was just like Gus himself. It was a lot more than it should have been. Jack didn't know how to pull away from something he craved so deeply.

As he was leaving the bistro, Jack spotted Gus by the delivery entrance. A truck driver was talking to Gus while Leroy checked over the delivery. There was nothing noteworthy about that except the driver's smile and how close he stood to Gus while they spoke. The jealousy Jack it sparked surprised him. He didn't care who Gus spoke to or how close they stood or the way that asshole leered at Gus as he walked away. Jack had to take a few deep breaths anyway.

Walking to his car, Jack couldn't shake the possessive feelings. Would Gus kiss the driver the way he had kissed him? The driver sure as hell wouldn't be left shaking and obsessed afterward. Jack kicked himself for being so weak and easy.

Maybe if Jack had gotten these schoolboy feelings out of his system when he was actually a schoolboy, this wouldn't be happening to him now. Belittling his feelings didn't make them go away though. Even as he drove aimlessly, Jack couldn't clear his mind of that kiss. He wondered what it would take to get Gus out of his system. Only one thing came to mind – fucking the hell out of him until he didn't want him any more.

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With that kiss he owed him from the night before, Gus wanted to make his desire clear to Jack, but then he couldn't stop himself. If Lillian hadn't come in, Gus might have done a lot more than kiss Jack.

He didn't expect to be so overcome. It shocked him that he could want

anyone this much. If he couldn't have Jack, Gus felt like his heart would burst. Once Lillian left, Gus looked over at him, but Jack was on the phone. Gus had to deal with a few things himself, but he couldn't stop thinking about what would come next.

Gus didn't find another opportunity to talk to Jack before he left. Soon after that, he had to go and pick up Josh from school. He wasn't surprised that Jack didn't come back that day. Josh was disappointed too. If only Gus could figure out how to reach out to Jack without scaring him away.

To distract himself from worrying that Jack might turn him down next time, avoid him, or leave town altogether, Gus called Brenda and invited her over for dinner that evening.

"I have one condition. You will not spend the whole dinner bitching about The Forbidden Subject," Gus told her. The Forbidden Subject was her cousin. Handling Doug's money made Brenda want to tear her blond hair out. Gus did sympathize, but he didn't want to hear her ranting about him all through dinner.

"I have my own condition – cheesecake," Brenda countered.

"I'll have it in the fridge," Gus told her. "And extra cherry topping and chocolate sauce."

They went through the same negotiation every time she came for dinner. Brenda didn't care what he made as long as it was followed by cheesecake.

Later, when he and Josh stopped by the store to get a few things, Josh knew what was up when he saw the cheesecake go in the cart.

"Brenda is coming over," he said, looking happy.

Gus wasn't sure that Josh liked Brenda all that much, but he liked cheesecake.

That evening, Gus made spaghetti and meat sauce and placed the cheesecake on display for both Brenda and Josh to drool over. Once the food and the cheesecake were polished off and Josh was in bed, Brenda sipped white wine while she and Gus sat in the living room. She asked Gus for his unvarnished reaction to Doug springing a new boss on him.

"Why didn't you warn me about Jack?" Gus asked her since she would have known all about it.

"The Forbidden Subject said he would tell you," Brenda said.

"You know The Forbidden Subject can't be trusted," Gus told her, but then he changed his tune. "It didn't turn out so bad. It might be the best decision The Forbidden Subject ever made, other than hiring me," Gus told her.

She couldn't believe her ears. "I'm not sure what you were talking about just now. Maybe we should stop speaking in code. I know you were not talking about Jack Velarde."

"Mmm. Say his name again. It's music to my ears," Gus told her.

She was astonished. "You're into him? Really? He seemed really stiff and jerky to me. I mean, he looks awesome in a boardroom kind of way, but eh." She grimaced and shrugged.

Now it was Gus who couldn't believe his ears. "Eh? Now you officially have bad taste, Brenda. The man might look like the boardroom, but he is all bedroom. And he has the most gorgeous, sad eyes I've ever seen."

"His eyes are mean."

"Woman, you are blind. And if you say his voice doesn't make you melt, I'll declare you deaf too."

"Fine. Have a go at him," Brenda said, shaking her head.

"I will."

"You'll try. Just don't bruise your ego too hard throwing yourself at a brick wall," she told him.

"Hey! I will get him," Gus told her. She was such a naysayer.

"Where do you get this confidence?" Brenda asked him. Dismayed, she looked him up and down like she couldn't see any conceivable reason for it.

"You are just mean," Gus told her and drew back from her critical gaze. Then he shrugged. "It's not really confidence. It's drive. When I wanted Suzanne to have Josh, I didn't have any confidence in myself as a future dad. I just wanted a kid so much. That's kind of like how I feel about Jack. That's what's driving me."

"Oh, weird," she said then she paused with a glass of wine halfway to her lips. "Wait. Are you saying you want to get serious? With Jack of all people? He is a cold fish, and he doesn't stay in the same town for more than a week. And he comes with all that baggage. The Forbidden Subject must have gossiped to you about that."

"He did."

"Gus, you're crazy," she said, appalled.

"Exactly. That's what I was trying to explain. It was crazy to ask Suzanne to have the baby for me. This is the same kind of crazy."

Brenda shook her head. "Oh, my God. You are going to get your heart broken into a million fucking pieces," she told him.

"I think I should have let you talk my ear off about The Forbidden Subject instead," Gus told her.

"I can still do that."

A little while after Brenda left, Gus was doing the dinner dishes he had left to get crusty in the sink. That's when he heard music coming from Josh's room. It was the iPod that had been Gus's gift to his grandfather. It was loaded with oldies. When Grandpa Lyle died, the iPod went to Josh, and he played it whenever he got scared. It served a dual purpose of comforting Josh while also letting Gus know that Josh needed him.

When he went to his room, Gus found Josh sitting on the edge of his bed with his lamp on.

"There was an earthquake!" he said as soon as Gus came in.

"In your dream?" Gus said, sitting next to him and putting his arm around the little guy.

"Yes. But there was a real one too."

"How do you find out about these things?" Gus wondered. Since disasters scared Josh so much, Gus didn't watch the news with him, but somehow he always found out anyway.

"I keep my ear to the ground," Josh said and went and laid down on the floor to demonstrate.

"That's the floor. Get back in bed," Gus told him and tucked him back in under the covers. "So where was this earthquake?"

"I forgot."

"I can guarantee you that it wasn't anywhere around here," Gus told him, but Josh wasn't satisfied with that. "I'll look it up." Gus searched on his phone and found the news story and read it over quickly. "It was in Guatemala. It wasn't too big. And yes, that's far away from here."

"Another continent?"

"Yes."

"Which one?" Josh asked, pointing to the globe on his desk.

Gus brought the globe over to him. "South America. This part here." Gus pointed out where Guatemala was.

Josh nodded and rested his head back on his pillow. Gus tucked him in more securely and then sat down on the floor next to his bed.

"I'll sit with you and listen to the oldies," he told Josh.

As Josh closed his eyes, The Miracles' "I'll Try Something New" was playing. Listening to it, Gus could see his grandfather dancing with Josh. Grandpa Lyle's careful, shuffling movements were in stark contrast to Josh's uncoordinated flailing and jumping. Then if some old lady cut in, Gus would pick up Josh and swing him around.

When he turned off the music and turned off the lamp in Josh's room, all Gus could hear was Josh's soft, even breathing. But in the background the music was still playing. Josh was laughing. Grandpa Lyle was singing along in his warbling, old man voice, bringing tears to Gus's eyes as he watched his son sleeping.

Chapter 8

After the kiss, Jack decided not to spend too much time at the bistro, where he would be within easy reach of Gus. Gus unsettled him, threw him off balance, but for some reason Jack didn't want to stay away from him. He could easily leave town, but he didn't. He was rooted to this place by feelings he didn't understand.

Jack did go in later in the day when he knew Josh would be there. As Jack went into the back of the bistro, Josh waved at him from his perch in the corner of the kitchen. He was watching the action, craning his neck to catch everything. At least he was out of the way there. Wouldn't do to have an excitable child underfoot.

Unfortunately, his father wasn't as easy to contain. As soon as Jack walked into his office, Gus came up to him and placed his hands on Jack's waist. His touch sent a jolt down his spine. Jack didn't move. He just waited. Gus was looking deep into his eyes while suppressing a smile.

Gus leaned in slowly and Jack closed his eyes. He shuddered under the soft feel of Gus's lips. Jack had to force himself to pull away and stop kissing Gus. He breathed hard and looked down. He knew if he raised his eyes to Gus, he would want to kiss him again and never stop.

"That's my new greeting for you," Gus said.

"Both of us seem to be forgetting that we're at work," Jack said.

"You have a solution for that?" Gus asked while he looked at Jack both suggestively and with hope in his eyes.

"You're obviously trying to start something."

"You noticed? But it's not something we can continue here."

"I'll be working from my hotel room tomorrow. You can stop by."

Gus's eyes widened and Jack could see him struggling to breathe. Then a big grin broke out across his face. He hugged Jack, kissed him hard then looked deep into his eyes with an incredibly happy look on his face.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Jack said, feeling like his heart was slamming into his ribcage. One step and he could press himself against Gus and let him feel how wildly his heart was beating. Turning away before he could give in to his impulses, Jack picked up a few files and decided to leave. If he stayed, they would be doing it right there on the floor.

That's why he should have stayed away, but he couldn't trust himself to even do that much. He thought he was strong, but he was weak against his need for Gus. As soon as Gus touched him, arousal blazed through him and his strength evaporated. Jack's resolve was nothing under the touch of Gus's hand and the sweet pressure of his lips. The look in Gus's eyes undid him.

Jack frowned as he went to his car. He was feeling a little more sober away from Gus. Now he worried that the reason he invited Gus to his hotel room was something Gus said when he first kissed him. Gus said he was sure Jack wouldn't make the first move. Who the hell was he to assume something like that? Without even trying, Gus had dared him once again, and Jack responded by trying to outdo him.

Realizing this, Jack considered calling the whole thing off, but Gus's reaction made that impossible. He was just too happy to hear Jack's vague invitation. It made Jack worry that Gus was expecting too much of him, but it also touched him to be wanted like that.

He couldn't remember the last time he felt that way. While he drove, he

searched for that feeling somewhere in his past. It wasn't part of any of his sexual relationships. It went further back than that. Maybe it was as far back as the days when he was a small boy and his mother was alive. His mother would smile just because he walked into a room. She would open her arms, and Jack would run to her. How in hell was someone like Gus bringing back a feeling like that? But it was unmistakable. Gus made him feel like he was always opening his arms to him and happy to see him. Fear and excitement made Jack's heart beat hard at the thought of being with someone like that. It would be the end of him.

Next morning Jack was just as consumed by what was about to happen between him and Gus. He had gotten up early after spending a sleepless night thinking about him. His body and his bed only existed for Gus now. That made his bed unfit for sleeping while his body was restless, vibrating with tension until the touch of Gus's hand could soothe it or ignite it.

By now Jack had spent too much time with him and felt he knew too much about Gus to claim that he hadn't gotten under his skin. If they just had a quickie, Jack would find it easier to dismiss his feelings for Gus, but this encounter had the wrong quality about it. Jack was already obsessed with it. He and Gus were moving inexorable toward something that seemed more significant than it should be. That was clear from the way Jack waited for Gus to arrive. He was alert for any sound of him and afraid that he might not come.

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For the rest of the day and all night, Jack's invitation was all Gus could think about. He arrived at Parker Springs Hotel all wound up. The place was high end, well suited for executives traveling on business. If Gus got to stay in a place like that in his younger days, he would know he had it made.

The lobby was built to impress. Copper panels were set into the variegated stone walls across from the reception area. The seating section had some interesting modern curves. In the middle of it, the water feature turned slowly and hypnotically. It was all a blur to Gus as he headed straight for the elevators.

To gain some perspective on what was about to happen, Gus tried to take Brenda's words to heart and remember who Jack was and the kind of life he lived. Gus was just one of his many hotel room encounters, a casual fuck, nothing more. That's how Gus should look at it, but he was way too nervous for a casual encounter.

As he went up in the elevator to Jack's hotel room, Gus's heart was pounding harder every second. If he didn't have Jack in his arms in one minute, he was going to explode. The possibility that he might not be there was unthinkable.

The elevator was too slow, or maybe just too smooth and quiet. On the fifth floor, in the subtly lit, immaculately decorated hotel hallway, Gus couldn't find room 521 right away. He had gone the wrong way and now he was ready to bang on every door until Jack opened up. It wasn't necessary. Jack's room was right there, where any sane human being could have found it with no problem. Sane or human didn't describe Gus as he knocked on Jack's door too many times.

Jack opened with a questioning look on his face while Gus stood there transfixed. Jack was really there, right in front of him. He looked slightly annoyed but otherwise perfectly fuckable. Gus wanted to do him right there, up against the wall or on the floor. If he had the time, he might kick the door closed.

While Gus grinned at him like a fool, Jack stood there unfucked, with his clothes in perfect order not ripped to shreds by Gus's clawing hands. Gus's brain had jumped ahead while at the same time his body was paralyzed. He was still grappling with the fact that Jack was really there. Jack sighed and stepped aside to let the crazy man into his hotel suite.

"Nice," Gus said noticing the suite. It was decorated in sea foam greens and brown-black wood with ultra-modern accent pieces. There was a comfortable looking couch and a desk under the window. It was all a fuzzy backdrop to Gus as his eyes searched for the bedroom and the bed.

Finding them, Gus backed Jack through the doorway.

"You seem a little worked up," Jack told him as they stood by his bed, breathing hard, facing each other like two opponents ready for a fight.

"Who? What? No. This is nothing. A quickie, in and out then back to work," Gus said to reassure Jack and maybe himself too.

He couldn't look at the depths of his feelings right now without being scared of them himself. But in a moment like this, as he pulled Jack's body close and hard against him, he couldn't hold those feelings back. They ran away with his sanity and he wanted to devour Jack alive.

On that note, Gus kissed his way down Jack's body until he was on his knees in front of him. Pulling Jack's shirt tails free from his pants, Gus unbuttoned a few buttons of his shirt and let Jack do the rest. He unbuckled Jack's belt and undid his fly. Immediately, his hand was on his cock, over his boxers, impatient for the feel of him. Generous thickness and length were revealed to Gus as he freed his cock.

"Beautiful," Gus breathed and then took it all in his mouth while Jack gasped and shook grabbing hold of Gus's shoulders for support. Gus could feel him sway as he sucked. After only a little while, Jack's whole body stiffened.

"No, no," he gasped. Too soon, he was coming and cursing both Gus and himself.

"That wasn't the main course, just something to get out of the way," Gus said with a smirk as he stood up in front of him.

Jack looked mad and pushed him down on the bed. He freed Gus's cock roughly. He sucked hard while glaring up at Gus. Oh yeah, with that look and that hot mouth on him, Gus was coming in record time like a fucking teenager getting his first taste of something wet and warm wrapped around his cock. Transfixed by the sight, Gus watched Jack swallowing his come hungrily. Done with that, Jack crawled over him then dropped next to him on the bed.

"Now we're even," he said to Gus.

"But not done. I know I'm not done with you," he said to Jack and kissed him hard to let him know he wanted a lot more from him.

They tasted each other for a while until they needed to breathe again. Gus felt like he hadn't gotten enough practice kissing in his whole life to be able to handle kissing Jack.

"Like a couple of horny teenagers," Jack said, echoing his thoughts.

"Yeah, but that was a fun time. I don't mind reliving it with you," Gus said then noticed Jack's frown. "Oh, right. You were going with girls when you were younger."

"Don't tell me you were out even then?" Jack asked in disbelief.

"Not out. But I sneaked in a handjob here, a blowjob there," Gus said.

"That's what makes you you I guess. You don't let anything stop you," Jack said. There was no admiration in it though. He sounded kind of irritated.

"When I know what I want, it's just a matter of getting it naked," Gus said as he started undressing Jack fully. Jack sat up and pulled off his shirt all the way while Gus kissed his chest and shoulder. His hand was on Jack's other shoulder. Gus felt a scar under his fingertips.

"From the plane crash," Jack told him simply.

They both stood up to get out of their pants. Gus got in a few strokes before Jack's pants were all the way off because he just couldn't keep his hands off Jack's hardening cock. Once Jack was undressed, Gus could see another reminder that Jack had been in a crash. A scar ran up one side of his leg.

The scars didn't make Jack look any less amazing in Gus's eyes, and he told him so. "You're unreal," Gus told him as he admired his body.

"As long as you're not bothered by scars."

"I'm not," Gus assured him.

Standing there naked, Gus felt clumsy next to Jack's slim, defined beauty. Gus hoped that he at least made Jack feel short, not that he was that much taller. Setting aside the spirit of competition, Gus ran his hands over Jack's body. His touch was gentle at first but soon he was groping Jack hard. Jack's skin was tight under his fingertips as they dug in, his muscles hard under his cruel hands. Gus wanted to be gentle but he couldn't be. He wanted to merge with him, feel him in every way, get deep inside him.

Moaning, Jack kissed his neck then bit his shoulder. He kissed Gus's mouth then pulled back and fumbled in the bedside drawer for condoms and lube. With lube in one hand, he came back to kiss Gus before he reached

behind him with his other hand and fingered his hole.

"You want to top," Gus said, only a little surprised.

"Should we flip a coin?" Jack asked, sounding kind of displeased.

"No. You go ahead. I'm good either way," Gus said. He could tell it was a bigger deal to Jack than it was to him. He seemed like the kind of guy who might have issues about that, and Gus wasn't going to push him into doing something he didn't absolutely want to. But Jack didn't look happy that Gus backed down for his sake.

"I think you should top," Jack said decisively.

Gus was about to disagree but then he saw that Jack was determined. He felt like he had dared him into it, but he had enough confidence to know he would make him love it.

As Jack got on the bed on his back, Gus stuck a pillow under his hips and got between his legs. Settling himself, Gus watched Jack as he blinked nervously and started to breathe erratically. Gus gripped Jack's cock and gave it a firm stroke. It was still hard and now even harder.

Jack's whole body was hard all over, too tense for Gus's liking. Gus drew his thumb over the head of Jack's cock to get his attention. He stared into his eyes and watched him focus. Leaning down, Gus kissed and licked his chest, biting his nipples until Jack shuddered. He kissed Jack's mouth next then his neck and said his name.

"Hurry up," Jack told him.

"What do you want to bet that you'll love it?" Gus said.

"You want to bet on...?"

"...on me and you," Gus told him.

"Just hurry up and fuck," Jack said, refusing to take his words to heart.

Gus chuckled. Jack might have been impatient, but he was also more relaxed. Now Gus started prepping him. He sucked his cock lightly while pushing his lubed fingers inside him. Jack was tighter than Gus had imagined. The way Jack's body gripped his fingers while his cock filled his mouth was almost enough to make Gus come.

Jack's gasps and moans were sweet to his ears. Gus couldn't get enough of him. He had to remind himself that he should stop sucking and fingering him so he could fuck him.

Jack didn't like it when he stopped either. He gritted his teeth and looked mad. Gus smiled as Jack pulled his legs to his own chest and gave him a truly dirty look. Taking in the sight of Jack all folded up for fucking, Gus was more excited than he could ever remember being.

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As he lay there with his legs up, waiting for Gus to fuck him, Jack was more aroused and scared than ever before. His heart was beating so loudly, he was sure Gus could hear it. It wasn't his first time taking cock, but he had

never done it with anyone he knew. Those few other times, the men were nothing more than hard cocks and hungry mouths.

Gus was so much more. He looked at Jack with irritating, ever-present humor in his eyes. He touched him in ways that made Jack aware of every inch of his own skin and Gus's too. He kissed him like he wanted to brand him with his mouth.

There wasn't a moment when Jack could lose himself in a haze of meaningless sensations. Gus was right there with him. He was too real and completely focused on Jack as a man not as a hole to fill. This was a fuck Jack couldn't use to escape himself. It was a fuck he wouldn't forget. He knew that as the first pain and pleasure of it made him gasp then moan.

As Gus pushed in gently but insistently, Jack couldn't remember being so tight, not since his first time. He realized he was afraid of Gus, and not because of his very nice, big cock. Fucking someone who already had too much power over him would open him in new ways. Gus would reach places inside him that he had locked up. Shattering his resolve, he would take more than Jack wanted to give. Too late to save him, his body was putting up a futile fight. Already Gus was thick inside him, making him pulse with a painful pleasure he couldn't deny.

When Gus pushed in again without letting him recover completely, Jack felt rushed and overwhelmed, fully aware that Gus was taking possession of him. Looking up into his eyes, Jack shuddered under him. Gus kept sinking in forever. The hardness of his cock was too much until Jack felt Gus pressed all the way into him.

Jack heard him let out a long satisfied groan even as he thrust in harder to make sure he filled him completely. Gus pushed his fingers through Jack's hair and kissed him. Jack opened his mouth to him and moaned. The kiss ended with both of them panting and looking into each other's eyes. Jack didn't realize he was sweating so much until Gus wiped the sweat off his face.

"I can already tell you're going to be a great fuck," Gus told him as he shifted and started to pull out of him.

He thrust back in again to the sound of Jack moaning louder than he ever had in his life. At that moment, Jack could feel the power of Gus's experience, and he was jealous of every lover Gus ever had. They should have all been him, and every man Jack fucked or sucked should have been Gus. He'd have to settle for having him now. Gus's eyes never wavered from his, just burned deeper and deeper into him as he thrust in and out, fucking him so thoroughly he could hardly breathe.

The long fuck pushed Jack to his limit. He wasn't ready for it in so many ways. He definitely wasn't ready to come so hard, to feel like the sharp spike of orgasm might tear him apart even as he was flooded with pleasure and relief. But the fuck didn't end until Gus was coming too, spending himself inside Jack with a grunt that turned into a roar of pleasure. As Gus collapsed into his arms, Jack had never felt such complete satisfaction from watching

someone else come.

Gus turned his head slowly dragging his lips over Jack's shoulder, over his neck, to his face until he found his mouth. Needing to breathe, they kissed slowly, tenderly. Jack felt like those kisses soothed his soul.

It seemed impossible to stop kissing, to let each other go. But then it happened. Gus's hand rested on his thigh briefly before he got out of bed. Jack wanted to tell him to stay. He wanted to reach for him and pull him back into bed. He felt paralyzed by those impulses, he didn't dare breathe or move or he wouldn't be able to let Gus leave.

"Taking a quick shower," Gus announced as he headed to the bathroom. While he was gone, Jack maneuvered himself out of bed gingerly, allowing himself a wince or two. He put on his robe and checked his texts and emails while listening to the sound of running water and waiting for Gus to come out.

With Gus showered and dressed and Jack still in his robe, they stood together in the midmorning light, staring into each other's eyes.

"It's been a while," Gus said. "I think I might have gotten carried away."

"You think," Jack said but he didn't mind at all. Gus had blown his mind and worked his body to the limit. How could he complain about that? If anything he wished it had been rougher, less pleasurable. What should have been just an impersonal fuck was too much like making love and just too much in every way.

As Gus kissed him and then left, Jack listened to the sound of the door closing. If he didn't slow down, he would lose himself to this feeling.

Jack took a long shower and got dressed while trying to keep his mind off Gus. As he straightened his collar in front of the mirror, Jack noticed that a smile had sneaked onto his face. What the hell was that doing there? He knew the answer and it worried him. He shouldn't be looking forward to seeing Gus again. And even spending time with his funny, intrusive little boy didn't disturb him like it did at first.

Jack watched his hands drop to his sides and a frown form on his face. What was he thinking? He couldn't afford to tie himself to Gus and his son.

As he watched his own face turn from foolishly happy to grim, Jack decided he didn't have a good reason to go to the bistro any more. He tried to harden himself as his decision sank in. The elation from before was replaced by disappointment so sharp it was more like anguish. Inside him his heart felt heavy. He breathed with effort and walked to his desk. There must be some business he had to handle, something to take his mind off Gus.

Chapter 9

The last few days at the bistro had been busy with no sign of Jack or word from him. After another long day, Gus dropped into his living room couch. He sat there feeling heavy from the disappointment of not seeing Jack. Too soon Jack had turned into someone he needed to see every day to be happy.

Considering that Jack was a guy who would be on his way out of town in a week or two, that was not a good way to think of him. But Gus wasn't so much thinking as letting his feelings run away with him. The way things were shaping up, that might turn out to be a big mistake.

It wasn't a coincidence that he hadn't seen Jack since they fucked. Hopefully this might be Jack's way of distancing himself until he came to terms with his feelings, but then maybe the feelings were only on Gus's part and to Jack this was a casual, out of town fling.

Gus had indulged in a few of those himself when he used to travel for business. He didn't want that from Jack, far from it. Casual was never an option between the two of them. Gus had known it from the start, but he chose to lie a little to Jack and a little to himself. Now he might be paying the price.

Gus suppressed a sigh as he looked over at Josh. He was sitting on the living room floor, unpacking his book bag. Several times that day, he had asked about Jack, and Gus told him that he must be busy.

"Call him. Tell him he has to have fun too and not to skip dinner," Josh said like a little devil on his dad's shoulder.

Gus wanted to do more than call. He wanted to hunt him down and shake him up. That was probably the worst possible move Gus could make against an opponent like Jack. Even if that was true, Gus didn't think he could go another day without seeing him.

When Jack didn't show up at the bistro again, Gus didn't sit around wondering and waiting. He left earlier than usual to pick up Josh and made a detour before heading to the school. Gus went looking for Jack back at the last place he had seen him, where they had fucked and made a deeper connection, or so Gus thought, maybe naively.

Jack opened the door to his hotel room and stared at Gus grimly. Stepping into Jack's suite, Gus was hit by flashes of their time together – the gleam of Jack's sweaty skin, the feel of the back of his thighs under his hands as he held them apart and pressed them down, the edge of that long scar right under his fingertips, the way Jack felt so tight around his cock. But he had to banish all those flashes and focus on this Jack, who looked at him with a hard, warning look on the verge of saying, "You shouldn't be here."

"Don't get your hopes up," Gus said to make himself clear. "I'm not here to fuck. I want to have this out. You're avoiding me."

"I have other..." Jack started to say.

"You're avoiding me. Don't start lying to me too."

Hearing his harsh tone, Jack glared at him, but he didn't try to deny the truth again.

"At least you're still here," Gus said in a milder voice. He had been afraid that he would find that Jack had checked out.

"I hope you don't think that means something," Jack told him.

He would have been better off if he hadn't said that. Gus cocked his head and suppressed a smirk.

"I didn't, but now I do," Gus said. He was letting himself gloat a little since he had noticed a defensive note in Jack's denial. "I keep wondering if I'm alone in this, but I'm not, am I? It just seems that way because I dived into this headfirst, and you need to stand on the shore testing the water with your tippy-toes."

"I have my reasons," Jack said, turning his face away from him.

"I know. I just feel like I'm so far ahead now that when I look back, you won't even be standing there."

"Then slow down," Jack told him, looking back at him with sad eyes.

Seeing that look, Gus took hold of Jack's hands. "No. You hurry it up. I want to get rid of this itchy, tense uncertainty. It's driving me crazy. I need to see you, and I need to know I'll be seeing you again after that. I want guarantees. I want to know that I have you heart and soul. That you're all mine. I'm afraid that if you leave town on business, you'll never come back." Gus's voice was husky as he spoke, too full of emotion.

Jack pulled his hands away. He didn't look pleased by what he heard. Gus hadn't planned to spill his guts to Jack. He kind of had a vague idea of playing it cool and maybe enticing Jack back into his arms. But it must have been genetically impossible for a Dwyer not to speak his mind and sabotage his own case.

Before Jack could say anything to throw cold water on Gus's overheated declaration, Gus pulled back.

"I know that was too hot and heavy. You're right about slowing it down," Gus admitted. "But I don't want you to avoid me. I want to slowly move forward."

"I don't know if I can do that," Jack said, his voice barely above a whisper.

That wasn't what Gus wanted to hear. It made him angry, but he still tried to plead with Jack.

"Just give me a chance."

Jack shook his head. "When I leave, I don't want to have any regrets."

"Screw regrets. You need to start living your life, not running from it. Or one day this will be your whole life – just work, and traveling for work, and impersonal sex with strangers."

"That sounds perfect." Jack put on a faint, chilly smile. He looked like he was determined to live just that kind of empty existence.

Gus was horrified that this was the future Jack wanted. He already cared too much about him to want him to live that way. As Gus opened his mouth to object, Jack walked past him to the door and opened it.

"Gus, I have work to do, and so do you." He held the door open until Gus felt he had no choice but to leave.

As he went to get Josh from school, Gus couldn't believe that Brenda was right. All around him the early spring sunshine looked so promising. Trees were green once again. Soon he would be able to spend serious time outdoors with Josh. It should be a happy time, but all Gus could think about was his blundering visit to Jack's hotel suite. He kicked himself for his brilliant, beat his head against a brick wall strategy.

Having no practice with serious relationships or handling skittish lovers, Gus was learning as he went. In the past, he would have just said "your loss" and walked away from any guy who seemed hesitant. But there was no one like Jack in Gus's past. No one had ever fired him up like this. He was ready to jump into anything and desperate to hold on to a guy he barely knew.

And what a guy. Jack lived under a cloud. His unwavering eyes and his quiet certainty were hiding so much fear. He seemed hard but brittle. The wall he put up around himself didn't make him any less vulnerable, but it might just put him out of Gus's reach.

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Gus had just stalked out of his hotel suite mad and disappointed in him. Jack didn't blame him. It wasn't easy for a brave man to understand a coward.

Gus struck him as a man who knew what he felt, knew what he wanted, and would always do the right thing. Jack only felt that way in business when he had numbers to back up his decisions. In his personal life, he didn't trust himself to do more than pick a guy for a night of sex. Sometimes he even doubted those choices.

Where his heart was concerned, Jack had shut the doors, barred the windows and turned off all the lights. The message was "Move along. Nobody lives here." Jack fully intended to live his whole life that way, protected from serious involvements and the pain they would bring.

Somehow Gus had broken in, bringing with him feelings that were bright and blazing, and the kind of turmoil Jack had been defending against. If Gus was the problem, the solution was simple – leave.

Jack was ready to be chased out of town by his out of control feelings for Gus. Leaving wasn't even out of the ordinary for Jack. It was supposed to be his next step anyway, part of his routine of always moving on. But when it came down to it, he couldn't make that flight reservation. When he tried, he looked at the flight options, but he couldn't pick a date. He kept pushing his departure further and further into the future until it became clear that he had no intention of leaving.

He didn't expect resisting Gus to put such a strain on him. With his bed full of vivid memories, he couldn't sleep. Sitting at his desk, he was reminded

of sharing Gus's office. He could hear his voice, which had a special timbre when he teased Jack. His touch and his taste flooded Jack's senses.

Jack closed his eyes, but he couldn't even for a moment forget how it felt to have that man inside him. Nothing like the empty, casual encounters he was used to. Things with Gus had a solid quality. The feelings stayed with him, echoing through him in waves of remembered pleasure and yearning.

Jack couldn't believe the hold Gus had over his body and mind. He had to force himself to let Gus go, but he couldn't. And seeing him again, so fiery, so open and sure, made Jack ashamed that he wanted to run and hide.

Chapter 10

The day after he visited Jack, Gus came into the bistro consciously trying to suppress the expectation that Jack might be there. Jack hadn't given him any hope, so why was he still hoping? The pang of misery he felt at not seeing him was the least he deserved for being such an idiot.

When Gus brought Josh to the bistro, he let him join Marco and Julia as they searched the front of the house for something a guest had lost. Josh was more than willing to crawl under the empty tables looking for it.

Running into the office later, Josh made an announcement. "Jack is here, and Doug is here too."

"I don't believe you."

"I'm your son. You have to believe me," Josh said.

"I guess if I have to," Gus said and riffled his hair. Josh flattened it down clumsily. "Now do your homework."

"I want to say hi to Jack," Josh said.

"I'll say hi for you," Gus told him. "Right after I kick his ass," Gus grumbled under his breath.

Though Josh was eager to go and bother Jack just as much as he was, Gus insisted that he sit and do his homework. Josh was still using the other side of Gus's desk because both of them refused to take back the desk Jack was using. It would be the same as giving up on him. And if he was really here, maybe they were right.

Gus went through to the front looking for Jack. He found him discussing something with Linc. Doug was lurking by the wait station, but Gus barely glanced at him when he joined him there.

"Two bosses on the premises, I don't know if I can handle that," he said to Doug while eyeing Jack.

"You don't even know I'm here," Doug accused him then waved a hand in front of his face.

Gus pulled his hand down. He didn't want to look away from Jack for

even one second. He was all buttoned up, perfectly tailored, and neatly pressed.

"Look at him flaunting himself," Gus said as his eyes raked over him.

Doug looked around for someone who fit that description. Jack was done talking to Linc, and he was now scribbling on his phone and not doing much of anything else. Doug looked at Gus like he was crazy, which he was.

Gus watched Jack closely. Jack's brow was knitted in concentration. He looked so serious and focused that Gus wanted to go over and mess up his hair, untuck his shirt and grope him all over. To get that temptation out of his sight, Gus shut his eyes, but he had trouble getting the image of a disheveled Jack out of his head.

When Gus opened his eyes, the neat and put together Jack was looking his way. He gave Gus a curt nod then he approached him. The thrill of arousal surged through Gus as he watched Jack coming closer. It was like he expected they would do it right there on the floor.

All they did was talk about the bistro. As Gus updated him and Doug on a few things, he could tell that Jack's attention was focused on him more than on the business they were supposed to be discussing. Maybe Gus was just hyper-aware of him and imagining things.

Losing interest fast, Doug stepped away, leaving Gus and Jack to it. There was a pause as they adjusted to their buffer being gone. Alone with him, Gus had that urgent feeling again that Jack was someone he had to hold on to at any cost. But how? Jack would be gone from his life soon. If somehow he could make him stay, Gus was sure that Jack would be worth everything it took to win him over.

For now Jack wasn't giving him any sign of thawing. He was all business even as he went to the office and took a seat at his usual desk. Josh was thrilled to see him and immediately tried to bombard him with questions. Gus reminded him to do his homework if he wanted to eat dessert ever again. Josh put a lid on it for about two seconds. During that time he noticed that Gus kept shooting stern and threatening looks in Jack's direction.

"Why are you mad at Jack?" he tried to find out, speaking in a whisper.

"Homework," Gus told him.

A little later, while Gus was busy on the phone, Josh sneaked over to Jack's desk. He motioned for Jack to lean over.

"I'll still be your friend," he whispered to Jack and looked up at him with an earnest expression.

"Thank you," Jack said. He seemed touched despite himself.

"Hey, you over there, you aren't allowed to like people I don't like," Gus told Josh, who jumped guiltily.

"I have a mind of my own," Josh said, standing up proudly.

"Who told you that?" Gus challenged him.

"I'm my own man," Josh said. He folded his arms and raised his chin.

"You're not a man yet," Gus told him.

"I'm my own kid."

"No, you're my kid. Show some loyalty," Gus told him.

Feeling sorry for him, Josh came over and gave him a hug. "OK?" he asked.

"I guess," Gus said. He couldn't help smiling.

Later on, Josh jumped up when he heard Leroy announce that a delivery truck was in the back.

"Where are you off to in such a rush?" Gus asked him as he got ready to race out of the office.

"I have lots of important things to do," Josh said.

"Name one thing," Gus challenged him before he would let him go.

"Top secret!"

"Fine. Go," Gus told him and watched Josh run off.

While Josh was busy watching the exciting process of crates and boxes being opened, Jack came over to stand in front of Gus's desk. He looked very formal and grim, and Gus prepared himself for bad news. He could already hear Jack saying goodbye.

"I'm not as strong as I thought. I can't fight you and me both. Would you go out with me?" Jack said.

Instead of answering, Gus got up and came around from behind his desk. Wordlessly, he gave Jack a big hug and then a kiss. Their mouths met roughly because Gus couldn't hold himself back after Jack scared him like that. The kiss slowed and became more gentle before Gus let go.

"Where are we going? And don't try to sneak in any work," Gus warned him when he got over his shock and was able to speak.

Jack said one word "Hillhouse" and Gus whistled, impressed. It was a very fancy restaurant, the kind of place Gus aspired to in his more ambitious days.

"You know you could have me for the price of a bag of popcorn. Or even without the popcorn," Gus said.

"We're doing this my way," Jack told him.

"I'll make sure to wear my good suit." Gus was ready to make out with him right there, but the sound of running feet warned him to step away from Jack.

Josh ran in right then. "I forgot about the jokes I have to tell Jack! You can help. Let's do yours first," Josh said to Gus.

Gus started it. "Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Gus."

"I'm not supposed to guess. You're supposed to tell me!" Josh cracked up then he started the next one. "Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Josh."

"Josh who?"

"Just joshing." Josh started giggling uncontrollably.

Gus knew what came next. "Knock knock."

"Who's there?"

"Dwyer."

"Dwyer who?"

"Washer and Dwyer," Josh said followed by more laughter. "Now we'll do Pop Pop's joke. I'll be Pop Pop."

"Well, who else?" Gus said. "Go ahead."

"Knock knock," Josh said.

"Who's there?"

"Mister."

"Mister who?"

"Mister, what's with all the questions? You trying to be a know-it-all? Nobody likes a know-it-all."

"Those were some good jokes," Jack told him.

Josh was pleased. He grinned, big gaps in his teeth showing proudly.

Jack left soon after that, and Gus waited until they got home to tell Josh the news.

When Gus told him he was going out on a date with Jack, Josh objected. "But Jack is my friend. You can't steal him."

"What? You don't have dibs on Jack. I saw him first. And you can still be friends with him," Gus told him.

"Are you going to marry him?" Josh asked.

"You're jumping ahead," Gus said. Josh was his father's son, all right.

Gus tried not to do the same thing, but when it came to Jack, Gus had about as much self-control as a kid. He wasn't quite at the altar with Jack, but he was giddy and so relieved that Jack reconsidered. Now Gus couldn't wait to have him in his arms again, to make him feel so good he would never be able to leave.

First he had to arrange for a babysitter for Josh. Gus was counting on Abby to babysit, but she had plans. As Gus went through his alternatives, he pictured having to include Josh on their date. He would monopolize Jack the whole time. Luckily Brenda was free. Considering how she felt about Jack, she wasn't a great choice, but Gus was desperate.

"I can babysit myself," Josh said seeing Gus scrambling to find someone on such short notice.

"How does that work exactly?" Gus asked him.

Josh shrugged and made a "you got me face".

"I already asked Brenda. She'll stay with you."

"Why can't Abby do it?" Josh whined.

"You don't get to pick your babysitter. Abby is busy. She has a date. Her boyfriend came down from his college to see her."

"Does everybody have a date?" Josh asked.

"Yes. Your date is with Brenda."

Josh shook his head.

"Just remember that when Brenda babysits, she always brings dessert," Gus reminded him.

Josh's eyes lit up. "What's she bringing?"

When Brenda came, she brought in a box of fancy cupcakes. She stood in the middle of the living room in her gray pantsuit and high heels like she had just come from work even though it was past seven. She opened the box to show off the cupcakes to Josh and told him the plan. "It's four different kinds. We'll split them in half so we can try all of them."

"You can't feed him four cupcakes before bedtime," Gus told her while Josh looked at him with alarm.

"It's four halves of four very small cupcakes," Brenda said.

"You're the accountant. But it's going to be on your head when he can't sleep," Gus told her.

Josh looked at the box of cupcakes with relief.

"I'm doing you a favor," Brenda said to Gus. "That means you should be providing me with my sugary anesthetic if I'm going to be enabling this craziness with Jack." She still disapproved of the whole thing.

"It's not craziness. We're officially dating now," Gus told her.

"He's so standoffish and cold. How can you like him?" Brenda asked.

"What do you know about it? I can see the man clearly. You are stuck in the cheap seats with an obstructed view," Gus told her.

"I think you're getting carried away."

"I am," he said, suddenly serious. He looked over at Josh, who was busy picking out a movie for him and Brenda to watch while they stuffed their faces with cupcakes. Gus lowered his voice a little as he told Brenda, "I'm scared to death and so is Jack. I'm scared that his fear will send him running. I walked into a beautiful trap, now I'm stuck and terrified of what will happen next."

"Oh, Gus. What have you done to yourself? Just forget Jack. You should date someone more like you – the new you, not the old you."

Gus was going to tell her what he thought of her advice when Josh jumped into the conversation. "What? What's she saying?"

"She says I shouldn't date Jack."

"Yes, you should. Jack is good," Josh said.

"Josh, you're voting for Jack?" Brenda asked him.

"Yes. A big vote for Jack!" Josh said.

"What does he see in him?" she asked Gus.

"He sees an awesome guy," Gus told her. Josh agreed with a nod. "The Dwyers are in agreement. That's because my boy and I have good taste, unlike you." Josh gave another nod to this.

"You are a pair. I give up," she said and went to take her cupcakes to the kitchen. Her phone rang and she balanced the box in one hand as she fished the phone out of her purse and answered it.

"Why does she want us not to like Jack?" Josh asked after she left.

"She just doesn't know him," Gus said.

"OK. But I'm gonna like Jack a million times as much now," Josh vowed.

"That will show her."

"And I won't let Brenda pick on him. Jack is like my friend Cody. Cody is always too serious, and he doesn't talk much so sometimes other kids don't want to play with him, but they just don't know him. But I do, and I have to watch out for him so other kids don't pick on him."

"And Jack is like Cody?" Gus asked.

"Yes."

"OK. I'll keep that in mind," Gus said. He didn't know what to think of this view of Jack. He had met Josh's friend. Cody was a little kid with glasses. He was smaller than Josh and very shy. Gus had trouble seeing what he and Jack had in common.

But when he thought about what it was about Jack that touched him, Gus could kind of see it. At first Gus was drawn to Jack by his looks, but since getting to know him a little, something about Jack had grabbed hold of his heart and just wouldn't let go. Maybe it was the tender, wounded heart that Jack protected so fiercely. When he thought of that, Gus could see what a vulnerable, shy little boy might have in common with Jack.

"Hey, I have a knock knock joke you can tell Brenda," Gus said.

"OK," Josh said and listened eagerly.

When Brenda came back, Josh was ready. He went up to her as she put her phone back in her purse.

"I have a joke for you. Knock knock."

She played along. "Who's there?"

"Jack."

"Jack who?"

"You don't know Jack!"

"Did you teach him that?" Brenda accused Gus.

Gus smiled at her and at Josh.

"Now Jack has his own joke too," Josh said.

He did the joke again for Jack when he arrived. Then he tried to make him stay to eat cupcakes instead of going to dinner with Gus.

"You won't get as many cupcakes if we stay," Gus told him.

"We can share them," Josh said. He could be generous even with cupcakes when he liked someone.

"Thank you," Jack told him. "But I'm taking your dad to a special place, and we can't be late."

Gus couldn't imagine what Jack had to do to get them a table at Hillhouse

on short notice. To Gus, the treat was being with Jack. No fancy restaurant could compete with that especially when Jack looked so gorgeous in a gray suit and tie with his usual crisp white shirt.

"Don't have too much fun without me," Josh told them, giving them both a jealous pout.

"Making sure we don't have fun is Jack's department," Gus said and smirked at Jack.

"OK," Josh said and turned to Jack. "You make sure then."

Jack agreed to be the killjoy and gave Gus a look like he was vowing revenge.

When they were about to leave Josh gave Gus a big hug then he turned to Jack. "You too," Josh said to him. Jack got down on one knee and let Josh give him a hug. It was a smaller hug for Jack, but it was still nice.

"Remember about not having fun!" Josh yelled after them and waved from the front door as they headed down the driveway to Jack's car.

Chapter 11

The car wasn't Jack's usual rental. It was a gray Jaguar F-Type. Jack and the car suited each other perfectly. Gus felt superfluous as he admired the sight of Jack next to the Jag.

Seeing him hesitate, Jack stopped as he opened the driver's side door. "We could always take the bus," he teased Gus.

"Just because I said that thing about a bag of popcorn doesn't mean I can't enjoy the finer things. This is what I lived for once," Gus said as he and Jack both got in. "I would have killed for this kind of night out."

"Is it really all in the past for you?" Jack asked as he headed north toward Dower Hill.

"Josh eclipses everything. And so do you," Gus told him. He could see Jack squirm a little at his words, but Gus was just speaking the truth. The thrill of this night was being with him again.

The drive on a dark, two lane road winding up a wildly forested hill didn't seem like it would lead anywhere civilized much less luxurious. Then at the last curve in the road, the restaurant came into view, and Gus couldn't help but smile at what he saw. The gleaming, white structure seemed to reach out into the night with its lighted walkways and terraces. Small bridges spanned streams and interconnected fish ponds. It wasn't a restaurant, it was a dream.

Valets parked the cars out of sight as guests were ushered either to the grand main dining hall or to one of the secluded tables on the grounds. Gus was hoping for the later and he wasn't disappointed. He got a glimpse of the impressive interior of the main building as they walked along the terrace and then into the vast garden. The dining hall was stunning, but Gus would much rather be somewhere private with Jack.

The garden paths were well-lit, but beyond them, he saw only pools of flickering, golden glow. Gus could occasionally hear laughter and conversation as they passed tables hidden by the greenery. The sounds of water lapping gently mingled with the breeze stirring the leaves. The garden was fragrant and cool around them as they were led to their own, very private table.

The aged wood of the tabletop was perfect for the outdoor setting. The leather seats were designed more for lounging than sitting. Everything about the place encouraged relaxation and intimacy. The privacy was an illusion though. The wait staff were lurking around, ready to attend to them. But the illusion was enough for now. Gus could wait until later to be truly alone with Jack.

Excellent wine and morsels of food were delivered by the extremely

unobtrusive waiter The food was exceptional, but in this light Jack looked so gorgeous, Gus could only think about devouring him. The tiny portions certainly left plenty of room to feast on Jack later.

"What changed your mind?" Gus asked. "Not me barging into your hotel room like a lunatic." He knew he should keep the conversation light, but he wanted to delve into Jack, not walk on eggshells around him. Being cagey and subtle just wasn't his style, and if he couldn't be straightforward with Jack, then they were just wasting their time anyway.

Jack didn't answer right away, but not because he didn't want to. He seemed to be trying to figure out the answer as he stared into his wine glass.

"I didn't see any other choice," Jack finally said. "I couldn't leave. And if I was stuck here, I might as well take the next logical step."

"I guess it's my own fault for asking."

"Yes, it is."

Gus smiled. He didn't care if his answer was harsh as long as Jack was being honest with him. And as long as Jack was being so forthcoming, Gus pressed on.

"You were dating women for a while. Does that mean you didn't know you were gay?" Doug had told him that Jack was gay, not bi. If that was wrong, Jack would correct him.

"I had suspicions," Jack said. "But I didn't think I had to act on them. I only fully admitted to myself I was gay when I felt I had nothing to lose."

"That's a great attitude to have," Gus said, not hiding his distaste.

"When I was younger, I was pretty desperate for my father's approval. I've given up on that now. I think marrying Nancy was part of that."

"How did you expect to be happy if you didn't listen to your heart?" Gus asked him.

"There wasn't much to listen to. I had never been in love, and I never tried to be happy with Nancy and Gina. I didn't even think that was possible for me. I thought it was enough just to have everything set up just right."

"Like building a perfect house and never living in it?"

"Yes. My life only existed to be seen and admired, like it had nothing to do with me. When I think back to that and then see how devoted you are to Josh, I feel ashamed of myself. I didn't deserve my daughter and then I lost her."

"What happened?"

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Since he had given in to his attraction to Gus already, Jack decided to tell him what he wanted to known. None of it was a secret. Gus had already heard some version of it from Doug. Now Jack decided to give him his own.

"Gina's real father was Bruce, a man I thought of as my best friend. He and Nancy had an on again, off again relationship. When he got Nancy

pregnant, Bruce was already married and I was seeing Nancy. When she told me she was pregnant, I had no reason to think anyone else could be the father except me. It was when Bruce got divorced, when he was free to be with Nancy and Gina, that's when I found out the truth. Gina wasn't mine."

Even now Jack wanted to call Nancy a liar, but the DNA test proved it. As he remembered that terrible moment, Jack gripped the stem of the wine glass he was holding. He wanted to take a drink, but he wasn't sure he could swallow.

"I can't imagine how hard that must have been. Are you still a part of her life?" Gus asked, frowning at the pain he must have seen on Jack's face.

"No. Gina was a year and a half when they took her away. She doesn't even remember me."

"She would if you had stayed in touch," Gus pointed out.

"Don't," Jack said, closing his eyes for a moment. Letting her go had been the most painful thing he had ever done. "It was a hard decision. Bruce and Nancy were moving to Amsterdam. If I had tried to stop them, hold on to Gina, I would have only caused everyone more pain. She's with her mother and father, and she's happy," Jack said.

"She might be happier if you were in her life too," Gus said mildly.

"The anger I felt toward her parents..." Jack shook his head. "They both betrayed me. I couldn't stay in their lives. And when I thought about how little time I spent with Gina... I didn't change too many diapers or spend too many sleepless nights with her."

"Not a hands-on dad," Gus guessed.

Jack had left it to Nancy to raise their daughter, but he could remember the sweetness of coming home to his little girl. Except Gina was almost always asleep by the time Jack got home from work. That was when he still worked for his father and desperately wanted to prove himself to him. When he came home, Jack would go into Gina's room and kiss her hair, stare at her angelic face and her little curled up fist. If he closed his eyes and allowed himself to think of her, he remembered her asleep more than awake. That's how much of a father he was.

"Did you love Gina's mother?" Gus asked.

Jack shook his head. "I cared about her, but I wouldn't have married her if she wasn't pregnant. I thought I could just follow the formula and everything would turn out the way it was supposed to."

"Not if you leave love out of it."

"Are you lecturing me?" Jack asked.

"No. I'm sorry," Gus said with an apologetic smile. "I just can't imagine trying to make a life with someone if I wasn't head over heels in love with them."

"To me it seemed like the easier path. Do what everyone around me did. It was after it all fell apart that I realized there was no easy path. I stopped trying to be something I wasn't, but I also stopped trying to become a part of

anything. All relationships seemed tainted to me."

"That's why I have such an uphill battle getting through to you," Gus complained.

"Sorry to make it so hard on you," Jack said sarcastically.

"You are worth it," Gus told him in a low, husky voice, leaning toward him a little. He seemed to like saying things like that and then watching Jack squirm.

To take it further, Gus put his hand on Jack's knee then moved it up lightly. His hand was there for only a second, but the heat spread through Jack's whole body. The hot tingle of Gus's fingers brushing his thigh, the thrill of his touch was overwhelming. Jack didn't expect the mere touch of his hand to hit him like that. It told him how much he wanted him – too much. Jack swallowed hard. There was no doubt how this date would end.

Chapter 12

After they left Hillhouse, they didn't go to Jack's hotel as Gus expected. Jack had gotten them a room at The White Crane, a fancier hotel than Parker Springs, and that hotel wasn't shabby either. They walked into a penthouse suite with floor to ceiling windows that wrapped around for a jaw dropping view.

They threw their suit jackets over some chairs and Gus had a good look around.

"A different hotel room in a different hotel, you're blowing my mind. I don't know if I can handle the excitement," Gus said as he hid how impressed he was with the accommodations and the amazing view.

"You're being a dick," Jack told him.

Gus laughed.

"Where the hell did you want to fuck?" Jack asked. "On the hood of my rental? In your front yard?"

Gus noticed that he didn't mention the obvious choice – his hotel suite where he was staying and where they had already done it, spectacularly. Not that Gus was being full of himself. It took two to have that kind of mind blowing, bone melting sex.

"You're too easy. Come here," Gus said and pulled him close.

"If you don't like this place..." Jack started to say.

"It's amazing, but even if it wasn't, you can take me anywhere. I just want to be with you." Gus looked out the windows where high-rises jutted into the night sky. The glow of city lights further on gave way to the darkness of the hills to the east. "We can leave the blinds up," Gus said. They were high enough and too far from anything to be seen easily.

"Why not," Jack said. He had a look on his face that Gus knew well by

now. He was answering a challenge. But pressed against him, Gus had no doubt that he liked the idea, or his cock did anyway.

Stepping back, Jack slowly unbuttoned Gus's shirt. Gus watched the easy flick of his long fingers as he undid each button. When his eyes moved to Jack's, Gus saw how intently he looked at him. As Jack's eyes searched his face, Gus didn't know what he was looking for. All Gus knew was that Jack was an irresistible sight.

Jack reached out and ran his hand over Gus's hair and his face. Hooking his arm around Gus's neck, Jack threaded his fingers through Gus's hair gently, giving him goosebumps. Overcome by the sensation, Gus pulled him close and kissed him quickly. Just as quickly, Gus let him go and went and turned off the lights in the room.

"We don't want to put on a show," Gus said as the room slowly dimmed then grew dark around them.

Now the view of each other was all they could see. The lights of the city spilled out all around, and above the stars were pinned to a clear, black sky. In the midst of it, Jack looked like a vision. The only thing more perfect would be if he wasn't still dressed. Gus grabbed hold of him, desperate to kiss him again and see him naked.

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Gus went to Jack suddenly and took him in his arms. His hands clawed at Jack's back impatiently then moved down. With one hand he unbuckled Jack's belt and opened his fly then he reached down the back of his pants with both hands to knead his ass roughly. He had Jack panting in no time.

"I imagined you'd be gentler, want to take it slow maybe," Jack told him breathlessly. He already knew that Gus wasn't all that gentle in bed. Jack just wanted to tease him about it, but certainly not to discourage him.

"You're too hot for slow and gentle," Gus said as he groped his ass and ground his hard cock into Jack's.

Jack wrapped his arms around him tightly bringing their bodies even closer. He needed to show Gus how much he wanted him too. Jack put his hand on the back of his head and pulled Gus in for a kiss. His other arm went tightly around Gus's waist. Gus pushed his hips into him harder as Jack's tongue slid into his mouth.

They pulled out of the kiss out of breath and leaned on each other, for a moment overwhelmed. Jack nuzzled Gus's neck and breathed him in. Gus was doing the same thing. His face pressed into Jack's hair then down, kissing the side of his face. Grazing his earlobe, his lips were gliding over his neck down to the collar of his shirt. Finding that it got in his way, Gus started unbuttoning Jack's shirt with shaking fingers. Gus looked at him with hooded eyes and breathed hard. Pushing Jack's shirt down off his shoulders roughly, Gus ran his hands over his chest and shuddered.

Now Jack couldn't hold back either. He wanted to rip Gus's clothes off him. Jack tugged his unbuttoned shirt down his arms and threw it aside. With his pants undone but still on, he kneeled in front of Gus. He fumbled with the zipper of Gus's slacks and took a deep breath to steady himself.

His lips went to the head of Gus's cock like a kiss. Drawing him in deeper, Jack's tongue flicked and writhed around his cock. Jack let the cock slide over his tongue deep into his mouth, as far as it would go. Finding it hard to breathe, he pulled back. He was overexcited, like he hadn't been since he had a cock in his mouth for the first time.

He massaged Gus's balls as he sucked, enjoying the weighty feel of them in his hand. He had missed out on giving a long, slow blowjob the first time they fucked. This time he made it last until he was dazed from moving over Gus's cock. All of his attention was focused on pleasuring him. His whole being centered on his need to make Gus come.

With Gus's moans and murmured encouragements, Jack sucked in a steady rhythm that built until Gus was coming. His fingers twisted in Jack's hair and his come spilled down his throat.

Jack was panting, still kneeling. The taste of Gus's come was fresh on his tongue. Letting his pants and boxers drop to the floor then kicking them away, Gus lowered himself to kneel on the floor with Jack. Jack pulled him close and kissed him. He felt Gus's hand on the back of his head and in his hair, his tongue in Jack's mouth. Jack was so hard for him, but somehow he still pulled away.

Standing up and fishing through his jacket pockets, Jack brought out lube and condoms. He handed them to Gus, who looked up at him from a kneeling position, his cock semi hard and thick between his legs.

"You'll need this," Jack told him. There was nothing ambiguous about that.

Gus looked surprised but pleased. "I thought for sure you would want to switch, but you're addicted to my cock, aren't you?"

"Don't flatter yourself." Jack was still standing over him, still a little breathless.

Gus pulled him to stand a little closer. "Let's see if I am," he said as he slid his hand up the inside of Jack's leg.

Jack shuddered at his touch so close to his aching erection. Gus freed Jack's cock and then pulled his pants and boxers all the way off. Jack kneeled and took hold of Gus's cock, feeling its solid weight, stroking it. In no time, Gus's cock was hard in his fist. Jack loved how ready he was. Stroking him, remembering the taste and feel of him, Jack was dying for it.

Gus's hand moved down his back. His fingertips slid down the crack of Jack's ass to tease his hole. Jack leaned his head into Gus's shoulder and growled. He ran his teeth over Gus's skin. When Gus finally pushed his lubed fingers in, he moaned. Each thrust went deeper until Jack was riding three of Gus's fingers.

When there was no doubt he was ready, Gus pushed him down on the floor and got his legs out of the way. He spread Jack and held his legs to the sides. Gus's eyes were predatory now. His whole being exuded a different, more aggressive energy.

Gus entered him with a hard push. It was just what Jack needed, and Gus was giving it to him. Jack could feel the power of his body and his desire. He shook and writhed under him.

Gus fucked him on the floor while the open windows displayed what they did to the world. Though with the lights off, no one could see them. They existed only for each other. Jack could only see Gus above him and feel him inside.

Gus never took his eyes off him. The intensity of Gus's eyes as he thrust into him made Jack feel like his soul was pinned under Gus's terrifying, intimate gaze while his body was taken and owned by him.

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Even before he was inside Jack, Gus knew Jack's desire was just as strong as his own. When Gus brushed his hole with the head of his cock, he watched Jack gasp. The expression on his face was pure, naked need. Gus kissed him. He loved that Jack needed to be fucked so bad he couldn't hide it.

Gus needed to be inside him more than ever, but his first thrust might have been too hard. Jack's back arched and Gus took hold of him.

"I've got you," Gus said to him in a whisper.

His body gave up its resistance, and Gus pushed further inside Jack with every breath. The look in his eyes dared Gus to give in to what they both wanted. Gus pulled back and Jack grabbed hold of his hips to draw him back. Pushing inside him again, Gus was exactly where he wanted to be.

Head thrown back, eyes glazed with lust, Jack was gorgeous. His long, loud moans drove Gus on harder until Jack was calling his name between words that dissolved into meaningless begging and cursing.

Gus pounded him with long, heavy thrusts that slammed him in to his balls. Under the slow hammering, Jack bucked uncontrollably, seeking release that Gus wasn't ready to give him. Gus firmly gripped his hips until he stopped trying to get ahead of Gus.

"Too soon," Gus told him.

He rubbed his thighs gently, feeling the rough, uneven skin of Jack's scar. Jack was still, breathing hard, glaring at Gus with gritted teeth. Seeing that he was under control, sort of, Gus started fucking him again.

Soon Jack's body stiffened then shook in his arms as the orgasm overwhelmed him. Gus felt the grip of his insides on his cock and fucked through it to his own climax. Gus was coming hard, calling Jack's name.

Jack opened his arms to him. "Come here," Jack whispered, hoarse from cursing Gus's name.

Jack's hands were in his hair damp with sweat as Jack pulled him down to him. For a moment, Gus felt that coming took the life out of him. He felt so dead as he settled himself into Jack's arms. That's where he wanted to be so he could die happy.

As Jack held him on the plush carpet of that hotel room, Gus was filled with satisfaction and joy. Too bad that they would have to go soon. If this could be every night for the rest of his life, Gus would be in heaven. But this was just one more night that might be the last, and it hurt him to think of all the nights both of them would be spend alone if Jack left town.

When they both felt like they could move, they dressed and got ready to head out. Gus took a good long look at Jack, who for once wasn't impeccably put together. He was usually so perfectly groomed, it was a treat to see him with mussed hair, wearing a rumpled shirt.

"You're making me want to get you naked again," Gus told him. "You wouldn't be able to walk tomorrow if we only had the time."

"I guess it's nice to know that someone wants me and not to doubt them," Jack said.

"Why the hell would you doubt that everyone wants you? You know you're a good time. The best," Gus told him as he grabbed hold of him.

"Thank you. You did fine too," Jack said but didn't meet his eyes.

"Don't fall all over yourself complimenting me on a job well done," Gus said trying fruitlessly to catch Jack's eye.

"I won't," Jack said, deadpan.

"That's OK, I heard all I needed to hear while I was inside you," Gus boasted and watched Jack's eyes widen. The inarticulate, crazed, moaning utterances had been music to his ears.

Chapter 13

For the next week, they had a few more quickies, mostly sucking each other off hurriedly in Jack's hotel room. Gus was looking forward to their next, proper date. He made sure to line up a babysitter for Josh well in advance and asked Jack out.

With no hope of outdoing Jack, Gus didn't even try. All Gus wanted was for them to have a good time. Gus took him to Milo's Pub. It was a hangout for the older gay crowd. As soon as they went in, Jack took in the clientele, none of them under fifty and most of them well over. The walls were plastered with movie posters from the seventies, and a grand piano dominated the center of the room. Jack turned to Gus with a questioning look.

"I thought we could pick someone up for a threesome, or maybe even a four way," Gus joked.

If they wanted to, they could have their pick of any guy there. Gus wasn't the big draw. Jack was the tasty newcomer everyone had their eye on. This crowd wasn't shy. They approached Jack and Gus and asked to be introduced.

Gus had been there a few times, so he was old news. The guys sized up Jack pretty quickly and nicknamed him The Sweet Sourpuss. Jack didn't exactly enjoy the attention, but he was a good sport about all the playful come-ons.

As Jack and Gus stood at the bar, waiting for a table to open, Don sidled up to Jack and lamented to him, "If I was only twenty years younger..."

"Try forty," Herb corrected him. He was Don's husband.

"And five or six pounds lighter," Don said.

Herb was there to correct him again. "Or twenty to thirty pounds."

"That's going to be us in forty years," Gus whispered in Jack's ear.

"I plan to age well," Jack whispered back, ignoring the real meaning of his words. Gus was predicting that they were going to be an old married couple, and Jack knew it.

"I plan to let myself go and wallow in married bliss," Gus warned him.

Well into their sixties, Don and Herb had been together for decades but married only for a year. Everyone called them the newlyweds. They had already threatened to show Jack and Gus their honeymoon pictures.

"We didn't bother to dress for a week," Don said.

Gus and Jack got their table just before the duets started. On Saturday nights, couples took the stage and sang the old standards together. It was touching to see these older couples looking into each other's eyes as they sang to one other. To break it up, there were always a few corny jokes thrown in between the songs. Some were genuinely funny, but Jack refused to laugh at any of them. It was like he believed the whole evening was a trap to ensnare him into growing old, fat, and happy with Gus. And being uptight and repressed, Jack refused to fall for it.

While the piano player took a break, Jack leaned closer to Gus.

"I'm afraid to ask, but how did you ever end up here?"

"Now you know my secret – my unquenchable desire for aged flesh," Gus said as he nuzzled Jack. He straightened and told him the real answer. "Actually there are these two elderly sisters, Pat and Edith, friends of my grandfather's, who come in here sometimes. After Granddad died, they brought me here to 'show me life' – that's how they put it. They had rooms right next to my granddad at the retirement home. Those two ladies were very frisky and real chummy with my grandfather. I don't know if they had a threesome going on with him or if they took turns..."

"You can skip over that part," Jack told him.

"Why should I be the only one to suffer?" Gus asked. "Pat and Edith used to do a sisterly striptease in the retirement home dining hall whenever they had too much to drink. Most of the time the staff stopped them in time."

"Please stop sharing your pain," Jack said, rubbing his temples.

"You can't fool me. You're having fun," Gus told him and kissed his earlobe.

Jack gave him a grudging smile. Damn, he was gorgeous with those dark eyes and that kissable mouth. Gus couldn't wait to fuck him into oblivion.

The next time they went out, it was Jack's turn. Just like Gus didn't try to outdo him by going the classy route, Jack didn't take Gus anywhere crazy. They alternated between elegant dining and some place that always had to be explained to Jack.

Gus's next choice was Hugo's. As they went in, Jack took in a smoke filled grotto with only two long tables meant for family style dining.

"Are we in someone's basement?" Jack asked.

"We might be," Gus told him.

"Should we call the fire department?"

The smoke was coming from the fire pit where meat was roasting on skewers over an open flame. The customers pointed at what they wanted, and the proprietor yelled out in a gravelly voice how long before it was done. Then his daughter translated his heavily accented English into English the customers could understand.

Unfortunately, the place was on the verge of becoming hip. Gus saw a lot of well-dressed young people eyeing the meat hungrily. That was kind of a disappointment. Gus was hoping for a more rustic crowd.

To give Jack the authentic experience, Gus made sure they sat across from a group of grandmothers in kerchiefs. They wanted to marry Jack to their granddaughters, of course. One of the trio of grandmothers was wise to Gus and Jack though. She shook her head at the other two and pointed from Gus to Jack. The old ladies argued about that for a while until Gus gave Jack a kiss to settle the argument. The one wise old lady smiled in triumph.

Afterward, Jack complained that he smelled like smoke, not just his clothes, his skin and his hair too. That just meant Gus had to eat him up. They came all over each other and made a mess of Jack's hotel sheets. To clean up, they jumped into the shower together.

As water ran down Jack's body in rivulets, Gus wanted to catch every one of them with his tongue. He wanted to bathe himself in the drops that came off Jack's body. While Gus licked him, the wet wall didn't let Jack hold on so he held on to Gus. Water ran over them warm and soothing as they kissed for a long time.

The next time it was Jack's turn, and the dinner was sumptuous and the atmosphere serene. The aftermath was a tangle of limbs in the back of Jack's everyday rental before Jack dropped Gus off at home.

Now Gus was in bed, restless and missing Jack. He hated that he had to leave Jack and lie in bed alone reliving the few moments he got to hold him.

He needed a whole night of holding Jack. It hurt to think that he might never have that if Jack didn't unbend a little. It hurt him even more to think of Jack sleeping with anyone else.

Gus still hoped that he could keep Jack from leaving, but he had good reason to worry. Every time they went out, there was something a little distant about Jack. Maybe it was that he always found some excuse not to come over to the house and only stopped by the bistro briefly when he knew Josh wouldn't be there.

That was a pity. Josh was always so happy to see him, and Jack's eyes would light up whenever he saw Josh. Gus could tell that Jack missed being a dad, and now he was afraid to get attached to Josh. If that didn't change, if Jack really didn't want to be a dad, then he and Gus had no future.

Gus wanted Jack to be a part of his life not at the periphery of it. It made Gus sad to think that this might be just a fling after all. Gus tried to set aside what weighed on his mind so he and Jack could enjoy each other, but it wasn't easy. With the tenuous hold Gus had on him, Jack might slip away at any moment and be gone from his life forever.

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When they met up at Jack's hotel room, Jack always waited for Gus to arrive with a sense of anticipation building until Gus walked in with a grin and rushed at him. He came over almost every day, but the sense of excitement never waned. Jack always felt desire surging through him until Gus came to take him like a whirlwind.

That day too, Gus had been to his hotel room and gone after making a mess of Jack and his bed. The sound of the door closing still echoed as Jack looked back at the disarranged sheets. He hated the sound of that door closing, no, he hated Gus leaving him. To dispel the melancholy feeling, Jack went out.

He drove aimlessly with the windows down. The day was cold and damp, not a spring day at all. The sun was out, but it seemed pale and distant, trapped behind a haze.

Jack let the cool air hit him, wash away his overheated emotions. He needed to reign in his desire for Gus. That couldn't happen as long as Jack allowed himself to stay near him, unable to go a day without seeing him. His feelings were getting more out of control all the time. And where would that lead?

Jack parked on an embankment right before Lafayette Bridge. The river rushed by, turbulent and gray. On the other side, Jack could see the houses of the outlying suburbs. Gus's house was over there, small and kind of shabby but so inviting. Jack had stayed away from it since his one visit.

He felt like every door in that house opened into the past and led to a different house. That other house was much larger with high ceilings and

expensive décor. Jack remembered walking through his empty house after Nancy and Gina were gone. The big windows let in so much sunlight, it hurt his eyes. He stopped at the door to Gina's room.

Jack was greeted by the cheerful mural with wildflowers and butterflies. It stood out even more now since Nancy had packed up most of the things from the room. She wanted Gina to have familiar things around her in her new home. But the room wasn't empty. It held all of Jack's pain. Everything in it seemed agonizingly bright to him.

He went in and sat in the middle of the room cross-legged on the grass green carpet with fabric flowers stitched into it. He pictured Gina toddling around the room. She had learned to walk right there, but Jack had missed her first steps. He only saw them on the video Nancy shot while encouraging Gina, "Come on, baby, come to Momma." That moment had only entered his memory through a computer screen. And now Gina was as unreachable to him as a child in a video.

This was the day Jack had made the decision not to fight for her. Earlier that day, Jack told his father. His father was angry with him. He wanted him to fight for her.

"Bring my granddaughter home," he demanded. "You will not let those people raise my grandchild!"

"Those people are her parents," Jack told him through gritted teeth. He could barely get those words out. It hurt him so much to give up on her.

As he sat on her colorful carpet, Jack tried to think of Gina, not as a child he lost, but as a happy little girl. If she was still there, she might sit across from him and try to get him to play with her. Jack's hand moved as if he wanted to reach out to her and play with her now that it was too late.

Jack drove back to his hotel with Gina on his mind. It was her birthday today, and his thoughts strayed to her whenever he let his mind wander. For the rest of the day, he immersed himself in work. He kept his head down and filled it with numbers. But as night fell around him, memories of Gina came back to him so vividly. His hotel room seemed stark and impersonal, like a blank screen where his memories were projected.

Desperate to close his eyes on the pain of his past, Jack went to bed. He fell asleep with difficulty only to wake up from a bad dream. In the dream, he was walking through a park. He held Josh's hand and Gus held his other one. As he walked between them and stared around curiously, Josh let go of Jack's hand to point at something. Jack saw that it was a little girl who was waving. Was that Gina? Jack looked back at Josh, but he and Gus had gone on and left him behind. They were moving farther away all the time. Josh still held Gus's hand, and with his other, he waved goodbye to Jack.

Jack had woken with a start. A sense of hopelessness filled him. Gina and Josh merged in his mind into one child, one pain, a wound in his heart that wouldn't heal. All Jack could see was a future of loss and anguish.

Jack didn't try to go back to sleep. He did more work and tried to banish all memories from his mind. But he knew Gus would come to see him tomorrow. Gus wanted to see him every day and Jack wanted him too. Jack wasn't avoiding Gus any more, but he was avoiding Josh, and that nightmare told him why.

Jack thought he could be with Gus while not entering his life with Josh. He convinced himself it was a compromise so he wouldn't have to give up being with Gus. But Gus and Josh were inseparable, a package deal. If Jack continued to see Gus, Josh was going to be in Jack's life until one day he wasn't. It would be wonderful until the rug was pulled out from under him, and Jack was told what he already knew in this case – not your child.

As he sat hunched over his desk, the ache in his shoulder reminded Jack of the price of reaching for something he wasn't meant to have.

After his first lesson, Jack had fallen in love with flying. He got his pilot's license and bought an old Piper Cub. It was his solitary indulgence, a way to lose himself. He flew when he wanted to clear his head of business.

He took the plane up only once after he lost Gina. The weather was good, but several times he flew into low clouds without noticing. It didn't rattle him. Without flinching, he flew through them.

It was a perfectly clear and blue patch of sky that was his undoing. The sky seemed to go on forever in every direction. He pulled up into a steep climb, gaining altitude too fast. He quickly exceeded the critical angle of attack. Jack remembered how the plane rose toward the sky and he let it as if he wasn't at the controls.

The plane started to shake, warning him that he was about to stall. He didn't right her in time. He did nothing. The tremor turned into a shudder followed by a pitch forward and a roll. One wing stalled first, sending him into a spin as the plane started to plummet.

A terrifying, twisting view of the brown and green landscape below could have been the last thing he ever saw. It was only some last minute rebellion against death and nothingness that saved him. He pushed the controls forward just in time to turn a crash into a crash landing.

He lowered the nose and leveled the wings. He pulled out of the nosedive and adjusted just enough not to kill himself when he landed. The tail hit the ground first then the rest slammed down, sending the plane skidding over rough terrain and into the brush. Trapped in the wrecked plane with blood trickling into his eyes, he lost consciousness.

Jack woke up in the hospital. He had a concussion, but the head injury wasn't bad. From the laceration on his leg, his head and his shoulder, he had lost a lot of blood. His shoulder had to be rebuilt. After that, he needed physical therapy to regain mobility in both his arm and his leg.

His father was furious with him. Jack remembered how he paced his

hospital room in a silent rage.

When he finally did speak, he said, "It's enough that I lost my granddaughter. This is too much." He warned Jack that if he tried to buy another plane, he would bankrupt him. "You will not use the money your mother left you to try and kill yourself."

His father's words didn't stop him from flying, but the anguished look on his face did. Jack never flew again after that. He couldn't trust himself. Once in the air, it was too easy to just stop – stop flying, stop fighting gravity, let himself fall.

Jack just went from place to place, chased profit and never stopped moving. That was the only way he could keep himself above ground. If he came to a standstill, he would fall and the next time he wasn't sure he could save himself.

Chapter 14

The next morning Jack was anticipating Gus's touch on his skin. He could already feel the heat of his kiss melting through him, his fingers undoing his fly, letting his cock spring free already hard for him. Jack felt it all even as he told himself that today it wouldn't happen. Now he knew he had to stop this before things went any further.

The sun was shining through the hotel room windows, but today was going to be even more dreary than yesterday. Now that his decision was made, Jack could feel his days sinking into drab monotony. It wouldn't matter if the sun was shining or not, his future would be gray.

Jack knew what he had to do, but he didn't know if he could. He felt like there was a storm inside him ready to tear him apart. His heart was swallowed by a feeling that terrified him. For him, the ache of love could too easily turn into agony. He wanted Gus so much, but he knew that being involved with him was a mistake he had to fix before it was too late.

When Jack opened the door to him, Gus almost smiled but then grew serious. He brushed Jack's arm lightly as he came in, not his usual onslaught of kisses and groping hands tearing Jack's clothes off.

Right away Gus had noticed that Jack had his guard up. He must be wondering why, what had changed? But nothing was different from the day before. This was just Jack waking up. It was time he stopped dreaming and faced reality.

"What's going on with you?" Gus said as he stared hard at Jack, trying to figure out his mood.

"I was just asking myself if it was time to end this. I think we've gone as far as we can go."

"No, we haven't. Not even close," Gus said vehemently, his eyes flashing. Jack wanted to look away, but he forced himself to meet Gus's forceful gaze.

"Have you considered the consequences? Because I have," Jack said to him.

Gus knew what he meant right away. "Is this about Josh? I noticed you didn't want to spend time with him." Gus frowned, waiting for him to confirm it.

"I'm not going to risk getting attached to a child that isn't mine," Jack said. His voice cracked at those words.

"I know you need to be cautious, but you can't arrange and manage things like this. Just feel what you feel."

"And live in fear that one day you'll take him away?"

"I would never want to hurt either one of you that way." Gus was earnest as he said it, but his good intentions weren't enough.

"You don't know what will happen. And I can't live through the same mistakes over and over. I can't let that kind of loss devastate me again."

"It won't. It's me. I can't hurt you. I just want to love you."

"I don't want to love you," Jack said, feeling like he would cry.

Refusing to accept his words, Gus took him in his arms. Startled for a moment, Jack let Gus hold him close. He breathed his scent.

When Gus said he wanted to love him, it meant so much to him and it hurt. The words cut into his heart, so sweet to hear and so hard to live with. Jack felt as if he would rather die than push Gus away at that moment. But he had to.

Jack stepped back from him, not willing to accept the closeness between them as natural and real. He didn't want to feel the meaning of those words in every fiber of his being the way he did. His life had fallen to pieces once before. By ending things now, he would keep it from happening again.

"I don't want to see you any more," he said to Gus, keeping his voice cold and not flinching away from what he had to do.

"God damn it. It's one step forward, two steps back with you. We're already dating."

"We were and now we aren't."

"Fuck, Jack."

"Leave and don't come back," Jack said and turned his back while he waited for Gus to go.

There was a long silence and then he heard the door close. It made a terrible, final sound. Jack didn't need to turn around to know that Gus was really gone. He could feel the loss in his heart.

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Gus went back to work feeling heartsick and dragged himself through the

rest of his workday. When he got Josh from school, Gus tried not to let him see how sad he was. Josh peered at him curiously anyway and tried to cheer him up with jokes.

"Knock knock," Josh said standing next to Gus's desk at the bistro.

"Who's there?" Gus asked.

"Boo!"

"Boo who?"

"Don't cry. It's only a joke," Josh said and gave him a hug.

When he got home, Gus called Brenda and told her that Jack broke up with him. At first there was only silence from her.

"I can hear you over there choking on that 'I told you so,'" Gus said to her.

On the other end, Brenda sighed. "I'm not gloating. I'm sad for you, honey."

Gus didn't like that either. "Woah. Hold your condolences, missy. I'm not done with him. I might have jumped the gun a little when I kind of told him I loved him, but..."

"What?" Brenda objected. "Any sane man would dump your ass for saying something like that so soon!"

"Are you agreeing with him now? It slipped out. This is just a setback," Gus said stubbornly.

"Gus," Brenda said like she thought he was crazy.

Maybe he was, or at least he was stupid. He had said too much to Jack in the heat of the moment. Then he had watched the heartbreaking look on Jack's face. It was like Gus's love had pierced and wounded him. Now the wall between them seemed more solid than ever, but it wasn't. Gus had seen and felt Jack open up. This was just a setback. He had to believe that.

Once Gus was in bed, Jack haunted him. He let the visions of Jack take him. Abandoning himself to fantasies mixed with memories, Gus stroked his cock slowly and whispered Jack's name. As Gus came, Jack was so vivid to him, almost real.

The tension of orgasm letting go, his muscles loosened and Gus slumped back into bed in defeat. If only he hadn't spent every second burning for Jack, if he could jerk off to anyone else. It was torture to come pretending that Jack's lips were on him and not to be able to hold him close after and kiss him.

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Days passed with Jack feeling like his life stopped the second Gus walked out the door. He worked and stayed away from the bistro. He didn't go out much at all. Most of the time he couldn't be bothered even to have meals delivered to his room. Leaving town was the logical next step, but Jack froze

every time he looked at flight schedules. He couldn't manage to make a flight reservation.

Getting on with his life without Gus was painful to consider, but the first step was done. Jack wasn't sure he could tell Gus it was over until he said the word love. That word struck him like a blow and filled him with terror. He couldn't face another shredding of his heart into a million pieces.

In Jack's personal life nothing had ever gone according to plan or turned out right. He had no hope for the future. Before he could even settle on any definite plans for leaving, he was already tasting the sense of loss from leaving Gus.

Sitting at his desk he felt dead inside one moment, and the next his body was taut with unsatisfied arousal and self-torture. Not being able to see Gus was agonizing. The violent beating of his heart wouldn't subside. His heart wanted Gus and it tore itself apart over him.

The loud knock on the door made him jump. Jack wasn't expecting anyone, but a hope stirred in his heart that it might be Gus. How stupid could he be? He had made things clear to Gus precisely because he didn't want to see him again.

"What do you want?" Jack asked as he opened the door and found Doug standing there.

"You look like crap," Doug said as he barged in. "And what are you doing to my man Gus?"

"None of your business," Jack said. He hoped Doug would leave soon, but he showed no signs of doing that as he paced the living area of his suite.

"He said you dumped him. That's a no go. I'm not allowing that," Doug stated as if he had a say.

"I can't get involved with someone who has a child. I won't put myself through that," Jack said though he didn't expect Doug to understand, and of course he didn't.

"You can't love him and leave him. He's a good guy. Solid, honest, reliable, all that boring-ass crap you like. You know how your dad married my mom?"

"I vaguely remember that," Jack told him.

"If a stick-permanently-up-his-ass guy like your dad can do it, you can too. Don't tell me your old man has more life in him than you do," Doug ranted.

"Insulting my father isn't winning you any points, you know."

"You're way over-thinking this," Doug said, shaking his head.

"More than two seconds of thinking is over-thinking to you."

Doug was now looking at Jack with a scowl. "What are you doing to yourself? Did you sleep in your clothes? You need to shower and shave. This isn't a good look for you. Right now, I'm ashamed to call you my stepbrother," Doug said. He was wearing a tight, bright yellow t-shirt and jeans and was his

usual blue-eyed, golden perfection. Meanwhile, Jack looked the way he felt – like shit. He didn't care what he looked like just as long as he could feel halfway human again. Listening to Doug wasn't helping him get his head screwed on straight.

"Why am I talking to you?" Jack asked himself, but Doug answered him.

"Because you've lost your damn mind. It's a no-brainer. We're talking about Gus, the guy Brenda vouched for. Brenda! Gus is a good investment. Go for it."

"Get out, Doug," Jack said and pushed him out the door.

Jack really hadn't expected Doug to take an interest in his love life, and he was the last person he would take advice from. But after his visit, Jack took stock of where he stood. He was stuck there, committed without ever having committed himself.

Sleepless and numb, Jack laid down in his clothes. It wasn't the first time. Getting ready for bed wasn't worth the trouble. He couldn't sleep anyway. He was too aware of being with Gus in this very bed. The feeling of it came to him in waves. Shaking with need, he lay still. He should at least change rooms, but he couldn't even do that much.

He looked at the ceiling and saw Gus leaning down to kiss him. Closing his eyes, Jack felt Gus's mouth on his, his tongue probing, demanding entrance. All he wanted was Gus. If Gus showed up at his door, Jack would have been on his knees, begging him to take him back.

Jack was just as tired and numb when sunrise filled his bedroom with light. Later that morning, Jack made it to the bistro in a sort of daze. It was a mixture of indecision and yearning. The morning sun dazzled him through his car windows. The air was crisp. Jack felt like he couldn't breathe enough of it.

He was driven to Gus by his heart. With every heartbeat, it seemed to be begging, "Don't let it end." That's why Jack stood in the doorway of Gus's office. For a minute, he just watched him as he worked.

Gus raised his head from his work and just gaped at him. Getting up hurriedly and clumsily from his chair, he rushed at Jack, taking him into his arms.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked as he was pressed against him.

"Hugging you because you need it. For such a smart, beautiful man, you sure are an idiot," Gus said as he held him tight.

Despite himself, Jack melted into him. "I'm so tired."

"You exhausted yourself being stupid."

Gus was right. Jack didn't know why he was there or why he was letting Gus hold him. He had no strength to push him away or pull himself away from him.

"Aren't you tired of hurting?" Gus asked him.

"Yes," Jack said, feeling spent.

"I promise that you'll be OK," Gus told him in a hushed voice.

"Really?" Jack didn't believe him for even one second. He looked at him and saw tears in Gus's kind, brown eyes. Jack stared at him with his heart in his throat.

"I know you've been through a lot," Gus said.

"I'm sorry I was so awful to you," Jack said to him.

Gus grinned confidently. "I can take it."

"But you shouldn't have to."

"Don't worry about me. I love you and I understand."

"Why did you have to say you loved me?" Jack said. He felt terrible that he didn't say it back, but he just couldn't, not yet anyway. He glared at Gus through the tears in his eyes.

"Sorry," Gus said insincerely. "I've never done this before. I'm bound to make a few mistakes. You need to make some allowances because I plan to screw up a lot."

"I'll try not to be such a jerk," Jack promised.

Gus frowned at him. "You aren't a jerk."

"I shouldn't take out my issues on you," Jack said.

"They're our issues. I'm not letting go of you."

Hearing his words, Jack felt such a mixture of relief, pain and fear. He thought they had broken up but Gus accepted him back so easily. Jack could see it now – with Gus there was no goodbye. There was only holding on and getting through things together.

After days of barely standing up, feeling insubstantial, Jack felt solid again. He had Gus not just to lean on but to push against too.

Gus kissed him, a long soft kiss that felt like a thousand unspoken promises. They leaned against each other for a while, and Gus rubbed his fingertips over the stubble along his jaw. He was probably noticing that Jack hadn't shaved. Jack reached for his face too, but then he grabbed Gus by the back of the head and kissed him hard and hot. Their bodies slammed together, cocks grinding. But this wasn't the time, and Jack dragged himself away from Gus. As the kiss ended, they both stumbled, off balance without each other to lean on. They stood panting, eyeing each other until they calmed down.

To make sure they didn't get carried away again, they went to talk at one of the tables in the dining room.

Gus spoke while holding Jack's hand. "I'm sorry for always pushing you. I mean that. I understand why you don't want to do this."

"I don't understand why I do." Jack looked down. "I keep coming back. I can't... I need to see you, and I can't stay away." Jack raised his eyes to Gus and gave him a small smile.

"That's good to hear," Gus said gloating playfully as he squeezed Jack's hand.

Jack shook his head.

"I'm glad you didn't leave. I can't jet off after you just like that if you don't

come back to me," Gus told him. Jack could see how afraid he had been of that.

"Well, it doesn't seem like I'm going anywhere," Jack said wryly.

"Good. I couldn't stand it if you did. Not that I would just sit here crying. If you left, I would find a way to come after you. I would throw away my pride and embarrass you and me both."

Jack looked into his eyes and smiled at him.

"You like that?" Gus said, surprised.

"It feels good to know how hard someone is willing to hold on to you."

"I have an iron grip." To demonstrate he gripped Jack's hand more tightly than was comfortable.

"I promise to hold on to you as hard as I can too," Jack said in a whisper and held his hand just as hard.

When they got up so Gus could get back to work, they still held hands. Jack felt a little silly doing that, but he also didn't want to let go.

"Come over for dinner," Gus said. Seeing how Jack looked at him, he drew back. "What's with that look? This will be a casual dinner. I promise not to pressure you. Come on over. We'll cook something. You can pick what we throw on the grill," Gus told him.

"I'll stop by the store and buy something," Jack said.

"That's a yes?" Gus said, surprised. "I thought I would have to sic Josh on you."

"I guess you have some persuasive power as well," Jack said.

"Josh will be thrilled. You made two guys very happy today."

Jack smiled at him as he walked away. He felt like his heart might burst, but it was wonderful to know that he would be seeing Gus again. Even with all his fears, Jack had to do this. He had no other choice. This was what his heart wanted.

Chapter 15

When Jack came back to him, Gus was so overjoyed he wanted to cry. Once he left, Gus could hardly concentrate on work. It felt wonderful to have Jack back in his arms, but it hadn't been easy to let him go even with the guarantee of seeing him later. For now, Gus could look forward to tonight and also to telling Josh that Jack was coming to dinner.

As soon as Gus got Josh from school to his office at the bistro, Josh looked over at Jack's desk. He still refused to sit there. That was officially Jack's desk now. Josh went over to look closely at what was on the desk to see if anything had changed. That's when Gus told him the news.

"Yes!" Josh yelled and jumped in place. "So he isn't mad at us?"

"He was never mad at us," Gus said.

"He was just busy?" Josh asked. That's what Gus had been telling him, but Josh didn't seem to believe that explanation a hundred percent.

"You'll see him at dinner. Make sure you have a good joke for him," Gus told him.

Josh nodded and furrowed in concentration.

"Don't just stand there thinking up jokes. Do your homework," Gus told him.

When they got home, Josh was a bundle of nervous energy. He spent all his time by the front window, keeping an eye out for Jack.

"You're back! What did you buy?" he asked Jack when he came in with the grocery bag that held their dinner.

"I got steaks and hot dogs," Jack told him.

"I love hot dogs!" Josh said.

"Really? So you're the one. You must be the only kid in the world who loves hot dogs," Gus teased him as he came out of the kitchen. He noticed that Jack was clean-shaven now, but he still looked a little the worse for wear. "Hot dogs and steaks – you covered all the bases," he told Jack as he went over and kissed him lightly on the mouth. He had to lean over Josh to do it, and he looked up at them curiously.

"You're kissing," Josh said. "Does that mean you're boyfriends?" He looked from Gus to Jack, eagerly waiting for an answer. As they both stood there speechless, Josh looked back and forth between them, getting impatient. "Well, are you?"

"Yes," Jack said. He looked a little panicked.

"Good," Josh said while Gus stood there still speechless. Josh took the bag with meat from Jack and carried it into the kitchen. That left Jack and Gus alone to stand in the living room and stare at each other.

"I think I should let Josh manage my love life. He just got you to say you are my boyfriend." Gus laughed, feeling kind of insanely giddy.

"If I'm spending time with both of you, then it has to be serious," Jack said. A smile played on the corners of his mouth.

"That's how I want it," Gus said. He grabbed Jack and kissed him again.

That's when Josh poked his head out of the swinging door to the kitchen. "That's enough kissing. We have to make dinner," he scolded them.

"OK. I changed my mind about letting him run my love life," Gus said. Like he could ever get enough of kissing Jack.

Dinner was filled with silly jokes and otherwise completely monopolized by Josh. Gus didn't try to restrain him. He hadn't seen Jack in a while so Josh needed to get that out of his system. And Gus would get his shot at Jack later.

Once Josh was in bed, Gus and Jack went to sit in the living room. The

light was dim from only one lamp in the far corner as they sat close together on the couch.

"Are you sure we aren't too much for you?" Gus asked. His arm was around Jack, holding him loosely.

"You're definitely too much," Jack said, but he said it with a smile. He looked over at a picture of Gus holding Josh as a newborn. "Look at you, the proud new father."

"Look at the petrified new father. I was a wreck. I was scared that something would go wrong and trying to be strong for Suzanne. She was scared too." Gus had been teeth-chattering terrified and trying to hide it. He felt such a strong connection to a child that wasn't even born yet. He had no idea how he held it together.

Reaching into his pocket, Jack brought out his wallet and a photo of his own. He gazed at it for a while with a heartbreaking expression. Gus waited until Jack showed him the photo of a smiling, dark haired little girl of about three standing with a man and a woman to either side of her. She was waving at the camera. On the back of the photo it said, "Gina says hi."

"That's her. I couldn't take my eyes off her when I got this picture, but it was when I read the back of the photo, that's when I cried," Jack said. He was close to crying now.

"Who sent the picture?"

"Bruce. Or at least that's his handwriting."

"He still cares about you, and he knows how much Gina means to you." That's how Gus saw it anyway. He also wanted to punch his lights out for what he did to Jack.

"That doesn't matter now. I just wanted you to see her. This is the one picture of her I carry with me. She looks happy, doesn't she?" Jack looked at Gus.

"She does," Gus told him and took him in his arms.

After a while, holding each other for comfort turned into something more heated. Gus became aware of every inch of Jack that was pressed against him. Jack's grip on him became more rough and urgent. Their breaths came faster. When Jack raised his head from Gus's shoulder, his dark eyes smoldered.

Gus knew he had to take him somewhere more private before they lost control and started doing indecent things to each other right there on the living room couch. Gus took Jack's hand, and with their fingers entwined, they went to Gus's bedroom and locked the door.

The mood between then was very different now. For one thing, Jack's eyes were glued to the bulge in Gus's jeans. Gus pulled him closer so he could feel Gus's erection against his own.

Jack wrapped his strong arms around him and buried his face in Gus's shoulder with a moan. "Missed you," he whispered as Gus held him tighter.

"Me too. I miss you, I want you, I'm crazy about you," Gus said in a rush then kissed Jack for all he was worth.

They were grinding together now while their tongues explored and thrust deeper into each other's mouths. Gus felt his breath sucked out of him. His heartbeat was pounding loudly in his ears. Lightheaded from the deep, unending kiss, Gus didn't care if he passed out as long as he got to keep kissing Jack. They broke apart panting and pulling off each other's clothes.

Gus grabbed Jack's hands to stop him for a second. "We'll have to be quiet," Gus told him.

"You know how to be quiet?" Jack asked skeptically.

"I was just taking advantage of the freedom of privacy until now. Yes, I know how to be quiet. Do you?" Gus asked, remembering all the noise Jack made.

Jack looked away a little embarrassed. But soon he was on top of Gus as they both fell on his bed. Naked under him, Jack felt so unbelievably good. Their mouths sought each other then opened sealing over one another. Rasping breaths and choked off sounds were all that escaped them. All the suppressed cries turned into hard groping and clawing at each other with gritted teeth.

As Gus kissed Jack's chest, he couldn't help but use his teeth on his nipples a little. By his response, he could tell that Jack appreciated that. Jack's muscles stood out in all their lean, chiseled perfection, and Gus considered himself so damn lucky. Staying close, Gus slid his body down over Jack's until he was facing his cock.

With his hand on Jack's chest, Gus could feel him groan as he sucked. He drew his hands down Jack's body. He gripped Jack's muscular thighs as he worked himself over Jack's cock like a madman.

Finally, Jack's body arched. Jack drove his cock deeper into Gus's throat as he came with his hands gripping Gus's hair. Jack was keeping Gus right where he wanted to be – taking him deep and swallowing everything he had to give.

Gus inched his way up Jack's chest to his good shoulder and then the crook of his neck. Jack threw his head back to let Gus cover him in licks and kisses and an occasional bite that made him moan. Gus could feel Jack's hand moving down his abs until he had Gus's rock hard cock in his hand. Jack released the possessive grip on his cock only when he was ready to wrap his mouth around it.

*

For days Jack had been dying for him, now he couldn't wait to have Gus's cock. He pushed him down on the bed and lowered himself until he was kneeling between Gus's legs. He slid his hands up his thighs and lowered his head so that Gus's cock brushed his face. He took his balls into his mouth one

at a time and sucked them lovingly.

Hearing Gus's breath hitch in his throat, he moved on to gently sucking on the head of his cock, savoring the taste. He let the hard length of his cock slide into his mouth, taking it as far as he could and then a little past that. He needed Gus so much. He pushed himself further than was comfortable until he felt Gus stop him. Gus's hand felt strange on his scarred shoulder, but he didn't mind. Gus could touch him anywhere. In moments like this, Gus owned him. That's why Jack wanted to give him the best head of his life.

When Gus was close to coming, Jack worshiped his cock with lazy caresses of his tongue then sucked deep and hard. He alternated slow and easy with fast and unrelenting until Gus was incoherent from being kept on the edge of coming.

Gus knew that Jack was ready to let him come when his hand covered Gus's mouth. Voice hoarse, he still tried to tell Jack how much he loved him. As he came, his love spilled out between Jack's fingers in a whisper of half words and nonsense.

"Shut up. I know," Jack told him. He could see Gus smiling at him in the faint moonlight that came in through the blinds.

"So romantic," Gus teased him.

Pulling him up, he wrapped Jack in a tight embrace. Jack fell asleep as soon as his head rested against Gus's chest.

*

Morning sun made its way through the blinds evilly stabbing Gus in the eye. He was irritated until he opened his eyes fully and saw that Jack was in his bed. That was worth waking up for. The way the sun came in in the morning was why Gus liked the other side of the bed, but that's where Jack was sleeping like an angel. Gus kissed his shoulder then heard a noise. Jack had stirred slightly at the touch of his lips, but now he jumped awake.

"Good morning. This is every morning in the Dwyer house," Gus said. "Josh has been my alarm clock for years. Listen to the pitter patter of little feet."

Jack described what they were hearing more accurately. "You mean the banging," They could hear Josh running through the house.

"That boy is energetic," Gus said with a grin as he got out of bed and put some clothes on. "If he's making that much noise, he's ready for breakfast."

After the two of them made themselves decent, they went into the living room. Josh was nowhere in sight, but a crash coming from the kitchen told them where he was. Jack looked worried.

Gus recognized the noise. "Josh probably made a tower with pots and pans and it fell over. That kid is irrepressible."

"Have you ever considered calling things what they are?" Jack asked.

Gus gave him an unequivocal no to that. Josh now poked his head out of

the swinging doors to the kitchen.

"Did you hear it?" he asked, grinning.

"Oh, yeah. We heard," Gus assured him as he went into the kitchen. The evidence of what he was doing lay strewn all over the floor.

"It was this big," Josh motioned above his head proudly.

"Why didn't you wake me up so I could take a picture?" That's what Josh had done once before.

"I wanted to make it bigger, but it fell."

"That's ambition for you," Gus said.

Jack looked between him and Josh like he thought someone should be punished, but he wasn't sure who.

"Try and put them back in the cupboard the way they were, not all topsy-turvy like last time," Gus told Josh.

Josh laughed. Last time he put them away, they fell out as soon as Gus opened the cabinet door.

After Josh put the cupboard in order with Jack's help, he had to be convinced to get ready for school.

"I'll go to work with you and Jack. I don't need to go to school, I know everything already," Josh claimed.

"Jack, quiz him," Gus said.

Josh had an answer for every one of his questions, but none of them were right.

"Sorry, I think you still have a few things to learn," Jack told him.

With a sigh, Josh went to get his book bag in order. Gus was making coffee and he turned to Jack.

"You think I'm too permissive with him," he guessed.

"How can you live with the constant threat of pots and pans crashing?" Jack asked.

"I think I went deaf during Josh's teething stage."

Jack looked distant for a moment, and Gus knew he had reminded him of his little girl.

"Gina had a nanny," Jack said. "She and Nancy stayed up with her when she cried at night. I worked through too much of her life then she was gone. I remember the nanny taking her away when she would start to cry so she wouldn't disturb me."

"It's probably good that you weren't a hands-on dad considering what happened," Gus said.

"I don't know. I can still see her looking up at me, smiling."

"I'm sure she's smiling wherever she is."

Jack nodded.

Gus knew that being around him and Josh was bringing it all back. He hoped Jack could handle it. Gus wanted them to wake up every morning in messy sheets, elbow each other at the bathroom sink, argue about how strong coffee should be and who was supposed to buy milk while trying to keep Josh

from putting M&M's in his cereal. He wanted them to share all the stupid little moments that make up a life.

Chapter 16

These days Jack was coming to do his work at the bistro again, but it wasn't like before. For one thing, everyone was giving them knowing looks. Being naturally reserved, Jack wanted to keep things professional and keep their relationship under wraps. Gus wasn't very good at that, or maybe he wanted everyone to know. More than that, he wanted to have Jack sleep over every night, and then they could drive in to work together. At the end of the day, they would get to go home together as well. Gus was restrained by his promise not to rush Jack so he kept the news to himself for now.

He looked over at Jack at his desk. Thinking back to the way he looked in bed – dark hair mussed, sleepy eyed and naked in tangled sheets – Gus had to suppress a groan. Under the influence of that vision, Gus had trouble not going over there and getting his hands on him.

He turned back to his own work, but after memorizing every inch of Jack, Gus didn't need to turn his head to see him. The slim, defined body with smooth, warm skin over tight muscles was right there in front of him. Gus could trace the dark hair on Jack's legs, the long scar running up his thigh and the one on his shoulder. He could feel Jack's nipples harden under his tongue, Jack's long fingers tangled in his hair and wrapped around his cock.

A text from Brenda snapped him out of it and told him that their relationship was no secret. Brenda was asking Gus why he swore her to secrecy about him and Jack when Doug was bragging about getting them back together.

He shared the news with Jack. "Sounds like Doug is taking credit for reuniting us," Gus told him.

"Thanks for letting me know so I can kill him," Jack said in an even tone. He sounded more irritated when he turned to Gus. "You need to stop updating Doug on the state of our relationship."

"It wasn't me." Gus had only told Brenda, who knew how to be discreet. "You've been coming in here every day. Anyone in this place could have told Doug about us."

"I don't suppose we could fire everyone," Jack wondered and glanced threateningly toward the kitchen.

"No. Especially since I just got Johanna to fill in for me Sunday. I'm all yours. Let's make plans."

It didn't take Jack long to come up with an idea. "Do you think Josh would like it if we went picnicking?" Jack asked. "We can drive along the river and stop wherever we like. I can rent us a convertible."

"You're the man," Gus praised him. "Josh will love it. There are some great spots along the way plus the old railroad cars on display at Limpet Junction."

"So it's a plan," Jack said and smiled at Gus.

Gus couldn't get enough of his smiles. They weren't as guarded as before but more open and genuinely happy. Jack still carried a veil of sadness around him, but something had changed in his eyes. They were the eyes of someone waiting for happy news after years of sorrow. Gus couldn't wait to take away every bit of sadness and see Jack truly happy.

Early Sunday morning, Jack showed up in front of the house in a classic, baby blue, Pontiac Bonneville convertible, and Josh jumped up and down with excitement. Gus shifted the booster seat over from his Jeep while Josh helped Jack bring out the picnic blanket and a cooler with some drinks and snacks.

While Jack drove, Gus looked over at him. The wind was messing up his hair and rippling through his shirt. He was a beautiful sight.

"I wonder if we are going to get any alone time today?" Gus wanted to know. As the car sped along the highway leading out of town, Gus had to lean in close to Jack to be heard over the whipping of the wind, but not to be overheard by Josh.

"Don't bother the driver," Josh told him, leaning forward.

"I was just talking to him," Gus said.

"You were teasing him," Josh accused him.

"I'm his boyfriend. I'm allowed."

"Is that true?" Josh asked Jack.

Jack smiled to himself and said grudgingly, "Yes. He's allowed."

"Jack is a good boyfriend. You better be nice to him," Josh lectured Gus. "I'm watching you, mister."

Gus reached back and tickled him. Squirming, Josh let out peels of laughter. Teaming up against him, that's what Gus had to look forward to. Gus grinned at the thought while Josh still giggled.

They were out of town now and taking Millery Road as it snaked along the riverbank. There was farmland on the other side with farm equipment clustered around sheds. Lines of crops alternated with dark, rich soil. Further on, they passed fishermen with their lines in the water. Josh caught sight of a fish being caught and reeled in by one of the fishermen, and he clapped excitedly.

Gus chose their first stop, the Apple A Day Pancake House. A vast apple orchard stretched out behind the parking lot. Seeing that the place was crowded, they got a bag of apple fritters and fried, battered apple rings and went for a walk in the old orchard.

The old orchard with its gnarly, ancient trees was open to the public. A few other visitors meandered between the rows of old trees. Finding himself among so many craggy, enticing trees, Josh had to climb them.

"Be careful," Gus told him. "And don't be surprised if we eat all the apple fritters while you're up there."

Turning back, Josh grabbed one fritter and one apple ring and stuffed them in his mouth before he left. Gus and Josh watched him climb one tree after another. Sunlight filtered through the branches as they looked up to see Josh peering down from among new, bright green leaves. Gus reached over and took Jack's hand. Jack gave him a look.

"What, you think holding hands is corny?" Gus asked him.

"Yes," Jack said and squeezed his hand.

Gus pulled him close and kissed him. The sun was bright in a clear blue sky. The trees were vibrant with new leaves. Gus sneaked a kiss whenever no one was in sight. Mainly he just enjoyed the simple pleasure of walking hand in hand with the one he loved while his kid tried to climb every tree he saw. Finding a really big tree, all three of them sat down to finish off the fried goodies.

Limpet Junction wasn't far from there. There were several antique railroad cars to walk through. They took the tour using the pamphlet as their guide.

Staring at an imposing silver locomotive, Josh wanted to know, "Do I need a license to drive a train, like I do for a car?"

"No. You can go right ahead," Gus told him and pointed to the front of the locomotive.

After frowning at him with skepticism, Josh pointed a finger at Gus. "Don't kid a kidder!"

"Is that something your grandfather used to say?" Jack asked Gus.

"Everything he says is something my grandfather used to say," Gus confirmed while Josh peered at the locomotive thoughtfully.

He turned to them to announce, "Cars are nice, but I decided I'm going drive a locomotive when I'm a grown-up, but no rush."

"No rush?" Jack said.

"Pop Pop said, 'Don't be in a rush to be a grown-up. Once you're a grown-up, you can never go back.'"

"That's some good Pop Pop wisdom," Gus told him.

"I have a million of them," Josh bragged.

"Listen to tiny grandpa over there," Gus said to Jack.

Josh grinned at them.

Back in the convertible, they followed the road as it went up into the hills. When the road turned back toward the riverbank, the terrain was rocky and the river had narrowed. The road was less traveled here and the roadside was thick with trees.

Gus knew there was an old mill somewhere around there, but they would have to walk to find it. They switched to a dirt road and came to a stop in a little clearing. Other cars were parked there, and they saw signs pointing them to the campgrounds, hiking trails and the old mill.

With signs pointing the way, it didn't take them long to find the mill. The wheel still turned noisily. When they went inside, Josh covered his ears.

From there they walked over a footbridge to the other side of the river. They stopped in the middle of the creaky, wooden bridge and looked down. The river was swift and lively as it flowed under the weathered wooden planks.

"Pick me up and hold me up high so I can look down," Josh said to Gus and jumped in place.

"No. What if I drop you?" Gus said, pretending to be worried.

"You won't drop me. You're strong," Josh told him with complete confidence.

Basking in his words, Gus looked over at Jack and smiled. "I think I need Jack to help me," Gus said. They lifted Josh together and held him over the railing. Gus could feel how securely Jack held onto Josh. There was no doubt that he knew that they held something precious between them.

On the other side of the river, they walked through the sun-dappled woods. Ahead of them was a small clearing with a huge stump in its center. Josh ran toward it and climbed on it. Gus heard Jack's phone ring. It did that often, but until now Jack ignored all calls and only checked the texts. This time Jack answered. Gus stepped away to let him talk and joined Josh who was counting the rings on the tree stump. Gus had him stand on the stump so he could take some pictures of him.

Jack stayed back, deep in conversation. When he was done with his phone call, he looked serious. Gus went over to join him.

"How do you even have reception out here?" Gus looked at his own phone. He had no bars.

"I might need to cut this short, I have to leave town," Jack told him.

"Like hell," Gus said, already mad. "It's Sunday. Whatever it is, it can wait till tomorrow."

"Some things can't wait. You should know that," Jack told him calmly. "I have an investor ready to pull millions from a project at a crucial stage. I have to talk to her in person. That means I have to leave now. By Monday morning, it might be too late."

Gus knew this kind of thing could happen, that Jack might have to leave on business any time. What he was really afraid of was that once Jack left, he wouldn't come back.

"When would you be back?" Gus asked him, still frowning.

"I don't know."

Gus shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. That wasn't the answer he wanted

to hear.

"You don't trust me to come back," Jack realized. Now he was the one getting angry, but worse than that was the hurt look on his face when Gus didn't deny it.

"Fuck," Gus cursed.

Jack looked around for Josh to make sure he hadn't heard that.

Not seeing him, Jack called out, "Josh!"

When Josh didn't answer, Gus felt himself go cold inside. He yelled out for Josh too. That's when they heard a voice. It was low – a man's voice, not Josh's. They ran in the direction where the voice had come from.

Just past the edge of the clearing, they saw Josh standing only a few feet from an unkempt looking man. The man was thin and unhealthy looking. His clothes were dirty. His hair was matted. His beard was overgrown, and he was scratching at it compulsively with one hand. His other hand was hooked around the back of his belt. Gus ran over to Josh and told the man to back off.

"I was just talking to the boy," the man said. He looked from Gus to Jack. His eyes stayed on Jack, who had come to stand between Gus and Josh and the man.

"You need to leave," Jack told the man evenly.

"You don't tell me what to do," the man said and showed Jack what he had in the back of his belt. He brought out a large, hunting knife. Gus backed away with Josh, shielding him with his body.

The man had a smile on his face and a wild look in his eyes. His attention was focused on Jack.

"OK, we can leave," Gus told the man. He meant Jack too, but he didn't budge. "Jack," Gus called to him sharply, but he still didn't move.

There was no telling what the man might do. Gus was worried about Jack, who hadn't backed down at all from that knife. This man obviously didn't like being challenged, and that's exactly what Jack was doing.

"Jack, you have to come too!" Josh yelled as Gus started taking him away.

"I'll be right there," Jack said. He sounded perfectly calm. Gus could tell that Jack was going to keep himself between Gus and Josh and that knife as long as the man looked ready to use it.

First Gus had to get Josh away from there, but he was fighting him.

"Jack! We can't go without Jack!" he insisted while Gus tried to get him to a safer distance.

As Josh kept calling for Jack, Gus picked him up, ready to carry him away. If only Jack would back down, but he just stared at that man like he would take him apart, knife or not.

Suddenly, the man laughed, showing his brown teeth. He turned the point of the knife away from Jack and scratched his beard with it.

"Jack!" Josh called out again, and Jack started to back away slowly. He joined Gus and Josh.

They kept an eye on the man as they retreated. When they lost sight of

him among the trees, they could hear him start to whistle. The sound of his whistling grew more faint, and they knew he was leaving too. They headed toward the bridge and then to where they had left the car. Josh let Gus hold him until they crossed to the other side of the river.

"I can walk," Josh said impatiently. Until then, he had his arms around Gus and held on tightly.

Gus put him down though he didn't want to. He wanted to hold on to him and never let go. He could tell Josh was less scared now, especially since they were all together. As soon as he was on his own feet, Josh took Gus's hand and Jack's too.

"You weren't scared enough, either one of you," Gus said to both Josh and Jack as they walked toward the open space where the car was parked.

"I was scared," Josh said.

"Me too," Jack admitted. "Why didn't you answer when we called you?" he asked Josh.

"My mouth wouldn't work," Josh said.

"That's because you were scared," Jack told him. "If you're scared and your mouth or your legs won't work, you have to push past that, and yell for help and run and fight. OK?" Jack looked at Gus to see if he agreed.

"That's right," Gus said to confirm what Jack was saying.

"OK," Josh said.

"You should have called out as soon as you saw that man," Gus told him.

"He was just there all of a sudden. I was looking at these big mushrooms, and I looked up, and he was right there. He said the mushrooms might be poisonous or maybe not, and he was smiling. That's when I heard Jack call me, but I couldn't talk," Josh said then he looked up at Jack. "You were brave."

"You should have backed off," Gus told Jack.

"I used my judgment," Jack insisted.

It worked out, so maybe Jack was right not to back down too soon. If it wasn't for Josh, Gus might have stood his ground too. He could remember a few confrontations from his younger days when he was reckless with his own safety. But Jack hadn't been reckless. Without hesitation, he had turned protective as soon as he saw that Gus and Josh were in danger.

As Gus buckled Josh in the back seat of the convertible, Jack looked back into the woods that surrounded the river. It was as if he was standing guard over them. He then got behind the wheel, and they drove to the nearest police station to make a report. The man might not be a danger to them any more, but they had to think of the next person who might run into him.

Josh was delighted to see a real police station, though he was a little disappointed that it was mostly just desks and offices. They did get to look at mug shots. When they didn't find their guy among them, a sketch artist was called in.

It took a while to get through all that, but then they were ready to be on their way again. Gus breathed a big sigh of relief as they left the police station. Being back outside felt nice. From the small town police station steps, he could see green hills in the distance.

Once they were back in the car, Jack wanted to know which way to go.

"Do you want to go home?" he asked Gus.

"No!" Josh yelled from the back seat.

"He's up for more adventures," Gus said to Jack. "How about you?"

Jack looked over at him in surprise. "If you guys want to keep going, we'll keep going," Jack said.

"Yes! The Dwyers want to keep going," Josh said, putting in the vote for both of them.

"You heard my boy," Gus said. Then he remembered that Jack was planning to leave. "What about your trip?"

"Trip?" Jack asked as if he had no idea what Gus was talking about.

"The phone call, the urgent business," Gus reminded him.

"Oh, no. I'm not going," Jack said.

"Because of what happened?" Gus asked. Though he was glad Jack wasn't leaving, he just couldn't help questioning his motives.

"I'm just not going," Jack said, stubbornly not looking at Gus.

*

As he drove, Jack thought about why he couldn't leave. He didn't want to explain how he felt. He wanted to stay and protect the two most important people in his life. It hit him hard just how much Gus and Josh meant to him. He would do anything for them. Postponing some business matter was nothing compared to what he was willing to give up to keep them safe.

There was something else too. Jack wanted to share this day with them. He was reminded that their time together was precious. Today was never going to come back. It couldn't be replaced by tomorrow or any other day. Where Gus and Josh were concerned, Jack didn't want to have any regrets.

They still followed the road that ran along the river. It had changed names a few times already. The road was cutting through green fields with only glimpses of the river when they hit a small rise. The sun was dipping toward the horizon and starting to turn a deeper gold. That reminded Jack that evening was coming.

"Are you guys hungry," Jack asked.

"I am," Josh piped up from the back.

"Have something in mind?" Gus said.

"Sweet Meadow Inn. It's right up ahead." When Jack had researched this area, he had come across the inn. Its name and quiet, homely setting seemed right after the day they had.

"That's a nice place," Gus said.

"It's not very exciting," Jack admitted. "But I'm in the mood for something civilized."

Gus agreed, "I'm with you on that. We've had enough wild times for one day."

The inn was a squat, red roofed building with two stories and tall windows. Its wraparound porch had tables and lounge chairs for the guests. A pleasant garden surrounded it. In front, a fountain had a statue of a small boy fishing while water cascaded around him. Gus took pictures of Josh in front of it.

Inside, the inn's dining room had a family atmosphere. As they were seated, Josh spotted the kids at the other tables right away. Looking at the menu, Josh took no time at all to choose a hamburger. When their food arrived, he wrapped both hands around the thick burger and took a big bite.

"Did you work up an appetite?" Jack asked him.

Josh only nodded and started wolfing down his burger.

"Slow down," Gus told him.

"I'm a growing boy," Josh said.

As soon as he was done eating, Josh joined a group of kids who were staying at the inn with their parents. Soon they got a little too rambunctious for the dining room. When they wanted to go outside, Jack and Gus left their table and went out too. After what happened today when Josh was out of their sight for only a minute, they weren't taking any chances. The two of them walked the grounds while the kids played. It was a nice evening, but night was coming on quickly. Sweet smelling shrubs in the inn garden scented the air.

The sounds of kids laughing and shrieking broke the silence between Jack and Gus. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but it was tense with all the things Jack wanted to say. Other people would pass by from time to time, so Jack didn't feel free to say much. He watched Josh as he played, looking so carefree.

"Why wasn't he more rattled? For that matter, why aren't you?" he asked Gus. Jack couldn't let go of the fear that gripped him when he saw Josh in danger.

"Josh isn't rattled because we were there, and it all turned out OK. As for me, I'm more rattled than I look. And I'm grateful you were there with us," Gus told him and took his hand.

"I always want to be there for you," Jack said. That was one of the things he was dying to tell Gus.

"That's why you changed your mind about your business trip," Gus said.

"What seemed important then doesn't seem important now. Someone else will handle it."

"I'm glad you're staying, but you were right when you said I was afraid you wouldn't come back. Sorry. Next time you need to go away, I won't make

a fuss. I have faith in you," Gus said and smiled at him. Jack could see real trust in his eyes.

Jack turned to him more fully. "I promise I won't use a business trip as an excuse to leave you. This is where I want to be. With you," Jack said and kissed him.

A little later, the kids dispersed and Josh ran back to Gus and Jack with a big smile on his face. They ended their excursion by lying on the blanket in the field that stretched from the back of the inn to the river. The field was gently sloping and grassy right up to the river's edge. Night had fallen and the moon was out. Moonlight made the sky glow and gave the water a silvery glint. Here the river was wide and slow. As the river flowed by quietly, the waves lapped against the riverbank with a whisper. As waves rippled gently over the surface of the river, they reflected the moon.

The inn rose above the three of them where they were stretched out on the grass. The first floor was lit up and all the porch lights were on, but on the floors above, only some of the windows were lit. Sometimes they could see a light go on or off.

Some guests were sitting on the porch, enjoying the view and the cool night air. Jack could sometimes hear their voices carried on the wind. Below them a few people strolled on the lighted path that ran along the riverbank. Though it was dark, the signs of life around them were comforting but not intrusive.

Gus and Jack were next to each other on the blanket while Josh chose to lie in the grass. It was a warm night with a cool wind that picked up now and then but didn't last. Gus still made Josh wear his blue and red jacket.

Josh was lying back in the grass, counting the stars as wisps of clouds drifted by. Hearing splashing in the water, he sat up. Some fish were jumping and Josh watched them, cheering for them.

Since Gus and Jack had the blanket to themselves, Gus put his arms around him and pulled him close. Shifting a little, Jack settled against him so they could lie comfortably together. Being held at the end of the day felt so natural and good.

Jack couldn't remember the last time he had let a man just hold him like this. He had denied himself all signs of tenderness. They were dangerous precursors to heartbreak. Jack knew he might suffer for it, but right now he didn't care. He was in Gus's arms and he was happy. Jack turned his face up and, with a look, demanded that Gus kiss him. Gus smiled, leaned down and kissed him long and slow. Jack was already addicted to his kisses, to everything about him.

Some time during their drive home, Josh had fallen asleep. He didn't wake up even when Gus lifted him and carried him inside the house. At Josh's bedroom door, Gus edged through the doorway carefully with Josh cradled in

his arms, still asleep with his mouth open. Setting him down slowly, Gus took his shoes and jacket off but let him sleep in his clothes.

"He didn't even wake up," Jack said looking at him finally snug in his own bed. "Poor, little guy."

"That means he had a blast. And so did I," Gus whispered when he joined Jack in the hallway.

"Even with the knife wielding madman?" Jack asked.

"Josh is going to have quite a story to tell the kids at school Monday. And you'll be the hero of the piece," Gus predicted.

Jack groaned then he had to admit, "I had a good time too." It was the best day of his life.

"You're staying over, right?"

"Yes," Jack said. It was where he needed to be tonight.

Every day Jack found it more difficult to go to his hotel room alone especially when Gus didn't want him to. Gus's smile when Jack said yes was irresistible.

"Then come here," Gus said. He opened his arms to him, and Jack stepped into the tightest embrace of his life.

Chapter 17

All next week after their river outing, Jack stuck close to them. They had dinner together most nights and Jack stayed over. Gus loved every minute of it. Their days at the bistro were spent together too. Gus worried that Jack would get sick of seeing him so much.

As Gus brought Josh to the bistro from school, Jack was getting ready to go to a lunch meeting. Josh wanted to know where he was going.

"A business lunch," Jack told him. "Do you want to come to work with me?"

"Yes," Josh said immediately, even before Jack told him where they would be going.

They both looked at Gus for his approval.

"Hey, you're supposed to be working with me," Gus said to Josh.

"Going to work with me involves going to lunch at Gilbertina's," Jack said to one-up him.

Gus watched Josh's eyes light up, and he scowled at Jack. "Don't tell me you are investing in that place? Investing in Gilbertina's is the same as cheating on me?" Gus claimed.

"Really?" Jack asked. "I'm not investing. I'm meeting a business contact."

"The bistro isn't good enough?" Gus asked, determined to give him a hard time. Meanwhile Josh was getting impatient.

"She picked the venue," Jack said.

"Fine. You can go," Gus said to Josh and pouted.

Josh went over to him to console him. "I'll try not to have too much fun," he promised and gave him a hug and a kiss.

Gus hugged him back tightly. "My loyal boy. You have all the fun you want." He then turned to Jack. "And you, see that gummy grin?" Gus said to him while pointing at Josh. "Don't fall for that."

He was a little worried that Josh might be a handful.

"How am I not supposed to fall for that?" Jack said. He was such a softie under that icy, hard exterior.

"I know," Gus grumbled. "You're not irresistible," he said to Josh. Josh laughed. The little stinker knew he was irresistible.

"I have a joke," Josh announced. "What do you call a bear with no teeth? A gummy bear!" Josh then pointed to his own missing teeth.

They left as Gus shook his head. He figured Josh wouldn't be too much trouble during a lunch meeting if he spent all his time with his nose pressed to the aquarium glass. He was still smiling at the thought of Jack taking Josh to a business lunch when Brenda knocked on the doorjamb of his office door. She stood there with her perfectly straight hair and her gray pantsuit, and folded her arms disapprovingly.

"Are you ever going to wipe that stupid grin off your face?" she asked him.

"No. That man is mine. Did you see him just now with Josh?" Gus asked. He figured she might have run into them in the parking lot.

Brenda frowned. "It was the most adorable thing I ever saw," she said and rolled her eyes. "And I guess you weren't lying when you said Jack was getting serious. Do you really think you can make it work with that guy?"

"I have to. I've never felt anything like this," Gus said to her as she came to sit across from him in Josh's chair. "There is only one other person I've ever loved so much that it hurts."

"Josh?" she guessed.

Gus only nodded. "It's a weird, sweet pain that never goes away."

"And it can make you do anything no matter how crazy?" Brenda said.

Gus nodded again while Brenda shook her head.

"But don't you see? Jack and I are in it together," Gus said to her earnestly and leaned forward. "We're both being crazy, taking a chance on each other. That's why it's going to work out."

"Jack is rich. He does have that going for him," Brenda said thoughtfully.

"Whatever it takes to get you on our side," Gus said.

"I am on your side," she said defensively. "I was just worried when you got so reckless over someone who was so closed off."

"I appreciate it," Gus told her. He got up and went around the desk to give her a kiss on the cheek. "You are the voice of reason."

"You mean the wet blanket?"

"No, I don't," Gus told her. To prove it, he took her to the kitchen to see what sweet goodies they had for her.

While Gus was at work, Jack texted him to ask if he could take Josh shopping and then home. When Gus got home, he found them together in his kitchen. Josh greeted him enthusiastically and stepped off the stepstool he was standing on to come and give him a hug. He was wearing the kid's sized apron Gus had gotten him.

"We're cooking," Josh informed him as he stepped back onto the stepstool next to Jack.

"Looks like you're cooking salad," Gus said seeing the greens in a big bowl in front of them.

"I can't cook. This is all I know how to make," Jack said.

"Good thing you're not in the restaurant business or anything."

"I can cook, but Dad won't let me turn anything on," Josh complained. "Not even the blender."

"You didn't wait till I put the lid on. You pushed the button and there was stuff flying everywhere," Gus said and Josh giggled.

"Sounds like our skill levels are about the same," Jack said and leaned over toward Gus for a kiss.

"This is a good-looking salad. We make a good team," Josh said to Jack.

"Me too right," Gus said, feeling left out.

Josh sighed, "Yes."

Gus made some chicken to go with the salad. Over dinner, Josh told him all about his lunch with Jack, and Jack called him an asset.

After dinner, Jack and Gus sat entwined on the couch. Josh was in bed. As Gus ran his hand up and down Jack's side, enjoying the feel of him in his arms, Jack looked thoughtful. Noticing his heavy mood, Gus squeezed him tighter.

Jack turned to him. "You know, taking a child to a business lunch was unthinkable to me not so long ago. Now it makes sense to me. That's because of you." After he said that, Jack looked far away. "Coming here, I feel like I fell into a trap and now I don't want to get out."

"A trap?" Gus said. He wasn't sure what Jack meant, but he already felt a little hurt.

Jack turned to him again. The melting look in his eyes took away the sting in his words. "I didn't mean it like that. It's a very appealing trap."

"So you are talking about me," Gus said, but then he couldn't help but laugh remembering his own words. "I called you a beautiful trap a while ago."

"Me? You're the trap," Jack said, glaring at him. "You and your whole life call to me. I wonder if I'm trying to regain everything I lost by being with you, and that would be wrong."

"I can't give you back what you lost. I can only give you myself," Gus

told him simply.

"I'm worrying about my motives because I want to move here to be close to you," Jack confessed.

"You would consider moving here?" Gus said, surprised and overjoyed. He expected to have to ask him to do that and then fight him until he agreed. Now he kissed Jack starting with his mouth then every piece of skin he could reach.

Jack smiled shyly in response. "I can live anywhere," he said with a shrug then he looked at Gus intently and changed his tune. "That's not true. I need to live where you are."

"OK," Gus said nonchalantly and shrugged. Then he grabbed Jack and squeezed him in his arms. "Damn, you make me happy," he told him and then kissed him again with even more passion than before.

"We better move this to your bedroom," Jack said, starting to breathe hard.

"Is it too soon to ask you to move in?" Gus asked.

"Yes," Jack said and dragged him off the couch and to the bedroom.

Jack locked the door, grabbed Gus and kissed him. Pretending to be reluctant, Gus allowed Jack to pull him toward the bed.

"I want to fuck," Jack said as he pulled Gus's shirt off and started unbuckling his belt.

At Jack's words, Gus's blood pumped harder and his cock stiffened even more. He still looked toward the door with concern.

"We've had some practice being quiet. Maybe we can risk it," Jack said.

They hadn't gone that far in the house, saving it for Jack's hotel room. Gus wasn't sure they could keep it down once they got into it, but his cock was already saying yes, growing rock-hard, pressing forward into his zipper. It got even harder as Jack pushed his firm, lean body against him.

Filled with lust, Jack's entrancing dark eyes were burning into him. His cock was digging into Gus's hip. It didn't even seem possible, but Gus moved even closer wanting to bury himself in that man. They stripped each other hurriedly, kissing constantly. It was one way to stay quiet.

Giving in to his need, Gus prepped Jack and listened to his low moans. When he had enough, Jack positioned himself on the edge of the bed on his hands and knees. Gus let out a grunt at the sight of him. At the sound, Jack turned and frowned at him.

"You look good like that," Gus told him.

Looking over his shoulder at Gus and scowling, Jack was a beautiful sight. His ass was up, firm and round, being offered for fucking. When Gus stood behind him, Jack lowered his shoulders and gave Gus full access to his ass.

Gus ran the palms of his hands from Jack's ass up to his shoulders. He followed that with kisses on his back. He was rewarded with small, desperate sounds Jack tried to suppress.

Gus was careful as he entered him. It was the only way either of them could stay quiet. Or that was the idea anyway, but Jack was so tight and hot, Gus was ready to lose it. He took a deep breath and thrust in further.

The death grip on his cock started to loosen as Gus rocked against him and rubbed his back and his ass. As Gus fucked him, low, desperate sounds escaped Jack's throat and he rolled his forehead on the mattress. Gus drove himself in deeper.

Jack pushed himself up on his elbows and raised his head to get a better look at Gus as he fucked him.

"I want to watch you come," Jack said in a breathless whisper.

Gus stopped and let him turn over. Jack positioned his hips over two pillows and Gus smiled at the sight as he plunged in again.

It was a gentler fuck. That didn't mean it was easier to take. Gus could tell that the slow, deep thrusts were driving Jack out of his mind.

It wasn't easy for Gus to hold himself back either. He wanted to fuck Jack like a crazy man, instead he leaned down to rest his forehead on Jack's chest. Jack rose toward him, and Gus kissed him before he continued fucking him.

Gus could see that Jack was getting closer. His eyes were glazed over. His mouth silently formed Gus's name and the word please. There was nothing sexier than that. It was almost Gus's undoing.

As Jack's tightening muscles gripped him, Gus was dizzy with excruciating pleasure of it. By some miracle he didn't come. It took a moment of heavy breathing for Jack's body to release its tight hold on him. Being inside him felt too good. Gus wasn't sure how long he could hold on, but he wanted to wait for Jack to come.

When it happened it was sweet and searing, making Gus feel powerfully alive one moment and spent the next. He kissed Jack lazily as they both came down from their high. Gus wiped Jack's damp face and drank in the sight of him, especially the blissful look in his dark eyes..

Gus was sound asleep in Jack's arms when the lamp came on, lighting up the bedroom suddenly and painfully.

"Warn a guy first," Gus complained as he opened his eyes to the unbearable brightness.

Jack had turned the lamp on. "I thought I heard something," Jack said, sitting up in bed.

Gus heard it too as the music got louder. "It's Josh. He plays music when he gets scared."

Gus got out of bed and went to Josh's room.

"There was water everywhere," Josh said as soon as he saw Gus at his door. He was sitting up in bed, looking scared.

Gus remembered the news that day mentioned that the spring thaw had caused flooding in Canada.

"That was up in the north, in Canada," Gus assured him.

"The flooding can't get us?" Josh asked worriedly.

"No. It's far away. Even if it wasn't, I'd keep you safe," Gus told him as he sat on the bed with him.

"Is Jack still sleeping over?" Josh asked.

"Yes, he is," Gus said and smiled when Josh looked glad about that. "You like it when he stays over?"

"Yes. We can keep him safe. He won't get into any trouble here," Josh said.

"Maybe just a little trouble," Gus said, and Josh frowned at him. "I'm going to sit with you so you can go back to sleep," Gus told him.

He turned down the volume on the iPod and watched Josh close his eyes. He was asleep soon after that.

"What scared him," Jack asked when Gus walked back into the bedroom. Gus could tell that he had been worried. He wondered what Jack would think if he knew how protective Josh was of him.

"Josh had a bad dream. He heard about some flooding in Canada. That kind of thing scares him. Grandpa Lyle was into storms and earthquakes. He was a Weather Channel junkie."

"Obviously Josh shouldn't have been exposed to that," Jack said with a disapproving frown.

"The Weather Channel? Josh was OK with it while my grandfather was alive. He only started getting scared after Grandpa Lyle died. To lose someone so close to him, I think it made death real to Josh."

Gus wished he could have spared Josh that knowledge, but sadness and happiness were woven into each life. Gus had given Josh the gift of knowing his Pop Pop but at a price of terrible grief for the old man when he died. Love and loss came in the same package, bound together and inseparable. Jack knew that too well.

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Jack had been worried sick when Gus told him that Josh had a nightmare. He was amazed that Gus took it in stride. He got into bed and wrapped himself around Jack.

From his look, Gus could guess what he was thinking. "You would put him in a little cocoon, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Jack admitted right away. He reached over and turned off the light so that they lay in darkness.

"I can't even imagine that. My boy would tunnel his way out." Gus said with a proud smile that Jack felt as Gus pressed his face against his shoulder.

"You're probably right," Jack said, having figured out a few things about Josh. Josh didn't need an anxious, overprotective dad. He needed someone

who struck the right balance, like Gus. When it came to being a dad, he was a natural. "You knew to put Josh first," Jack told him. "Watching you be a dad to Josh reminds me of what I lost and what I never had with Gina. You know just what to do. You're a real dad to Josh. I never was."

"You were a real dad," Gus insisted. "There are all sorts of different dads. My dad didn't spend a ton of time with me and Liam when we were little, but we still loved him."

"You didn't follow in his footsteps though. I turned into the same kind of father my own father was," Jack said.

"Doug said he's ..." Gus started to say then stopped. He was probably trying to figure out how to rephrase "The man has an iceberg up his ass" into something more polite.

"Standoffish," Jack said to help him out.

"How did he react when you told him you were gay?" Gus asked.

"With surprising calm. He accepted it without objection."

"I'm glad he took it well," Gus said. Jack could tell that he was thinking of his own parents' disapproval.

"I wouldn't say that," Jack said, remembering the moment when he told him and then waited for his reaction. "His exact words were 'I came too close to losing you to care about who you fuck,'" Jack told Gus.

"Nice," Gus said. "Still better than mine."

Jack gave Gus a soft, consoling kiss. Gus's parents should be proud of the son they had in him. Jack felt lucky to be with him.

Being with Gus and Josh, he had come to realize that they weren't an interlude in his life. That's why the decision to move close to them hadn't been as difficult as he expected. His heart had decided his fate and rooted him here as firmly as an old tree.

It had been a long time since Jack had a home. Sleepless nights and recurring nightmares had driven him out of the house he once shared with Nancy and Gina. Every night he woke up from dreams of holding Gina as she smiled at him, and then the next second, she was torn out of his arms. Except he hadn't held her that much in real life, only enough to remember the exact weight of her tiny body. He could picture her smile and feel her tiny hands on his face when he touched his nose to hers. He only held her enough to feel the unbearable pain of losing her and to regret not spending every minute with her when she was his. Losing Gina had been a hard way to find out what really mattered to him.

Jack was only now starting to accept his loss. He couldn't change the fact that Gina wasn't his. By now, she didn't even know who he was. She didn't remember that he ever held her or called her his little princess, but in his heart, Gina would always be his little girl.

What had changed for him was that he could see a future. Under Gus's teasing looks and Josh's smiles, Jack felt like a new man. He was reckless and

desperate to be with them and to finally be happy.

Gus and Josh accepted him into their hearts so easily because their hearts were open. Jack had to struggle. He had to tear down the defenses he had built, and it hurt to love them back. It terrified him because he knew that if he lost them, he couldn't survive it. Even if he wasn't strong enough, it was too late. His heart was already in their hands.

Chapter 18

It was a warm sunny morning that was made complete by driving in to work with Jack. Jack did try to open his laptop and sneak in some work during the drive. Gus gave him a warning look, and Jack shut his laptop again with a grumble.

He went to it as soon as he was at his desk. He was like an addict when it came to number crunching. A call interrupted Gus as he was contemplating how sexy Jack was when he got all serious and businesslike. Seeing that the call was from New Zealand, Gus frowned. The news he got made him stop breathing. He put a hand to his forehead and closed his eyes.

Jack stopped working and waited for Gus to hang up. "What is it?" he asked.

Gus had to take a few deep breaths before he could answer. He got up and paced the office.

"My brother, Liam, got hurt. Some kind of construction accident, a collapse. I don't really know. He's in intensive care. He might not... It's bad. It's bad," Gus stammered and Jack came over and took him in his arms. "I have to go. I have to go and see him. They said he might...." Gus couldn't say the rest, but Jack understood.

"I'll make travel arrangements. What city?" Jack asked and got on his laptop.

"They took him to a hospital in Wellington."

"I'll take care of the flight reservations. Tell me you have a valid passport," Jack said.

"I do," Gus confirmed.

"Good."

"Josh..." Gus started to say.

"A flight to New Zealand won't leave until the evening. We can get Josh from school, take him home so you can explain things to him and pack," Jack told him.

Feeling numb, Gus only nodded.

"I have a flight to Wellington. I'm booking it," Jack said.

"Thank you. That's a huge help." Gus could now focus on what to say to Josh so he wouldn't scare him. He also needed to figure out who would watch

him while he was gone. He called Abby and put her on speaker so Jack would know what the plan was.

"If I rush straight there from my classes on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, I can pick him up," Abby said.

"You don't need to rush, I can pick him up from school," Jack volunteered.

"Really?" Abby said, surprised.

Gus smiled. He wasn't surprised that Jack stepped up like this.

"I can bring him here like you usually do," Jack said to Gus. "I'm going to be filling in for you anyway."

"Thank you. That would be great. I'll let the school know," Gus told him. "I texted Brenda, and she'll be staying with Josh at the house overnight. Abby, can you pick him up from home to take him to school."

"No problem," she said.

"If you ever need me to take him to school, let me know," Jack said. He and Abby exchanged contact information while Gus texted Brenda with the update.

Gus was touched that Jack was pitching in like this. It wasn't so long ago that he was keeping his distance from Josh. Though he seemed willing, Gus didn't want to overtax Jack with taking care of Josh full time, especially with Jack's issues from his past. This way all three of them would have enough free time for themselves. Plus, it would be comforting for Josh to spend some time with Abby and Brenda since he had known them longer.

Gus felt better knowing that Josh would be in good hands while he went to be with Liam. He tried not to think about what Liam's father-in-law had told him, his voice breaking. They were expecting the worst. Sue's father had told him to hurry, but Gus couldn't believe it. Liam couldn't die. He was too strong and crazy, too determined. Despite what he was told, Gus held out hope that Liam would make it against all odds.

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Gus's face was drawn and his expression was blank as Jack drove him and Josh to the airport. Jack remembered how stricken he had looked when he got the news about his brother. He had never seen Gus look so pale and lost. When Jack took him in his arms, he could feel Gus shaking. Now his expression changed as he turned and faced Josh in the back seat.

"Remember how I told you that you and I are going to fly to New Zealand one day. That's still going to happen," Gus told him.

Josh nodded. Jack could tell that he was scared. He looked even smaller to Jack than usual. As they walked into the airport, Josh held both his hand and Gus's. The little guy looked around worriedly at all the activity. Gus picked up Josh in his arms, and Jack took the carry-on off his shoulder. They walked around and tried to keep Josh occupied.

Next Gus had to go through security so that was as far as Jack and Josh could go. Gus and Josh shared a long, tight hug. Jack could tell that neither one of them wanted to let go. But eventually Gus set the teary eyed Josh on his own feet. Jack hugged Gus, holding on to him for as long as he could.

"He'll pull through," Jack whispered. He couldn't know that, but in that moment he believed it.

Gus said, "Thank you." He kissed Josh then Jack and went toward the security checkpoint. Not looking where he was going, Gus turned to wave at them constantly. Josh also waved non-stop until he lost sight of Gus.

Jack kept an arm around Josh's little shoulders and worried that he might not be able to comfort him. When Josh looked like he might cry, Jack pointed to the big window. "Let's watch the plane take off and wave to your dad."

Josh ran over and looked outside. A plane was ascending just then, and Josh waved vigorously

"Is that his plane?" Josh asked.

"Not yet. But you can wave at it anyway," Jack told him.

Josh did. He then waved at all the planes. The sun was low on the horizon and its rays glinted off the planes. When Gus's plane finally took off, Josh waved even harder and didn't stop until the plane had been out of sight for a few minutes. Long after the plane was gone, Josh kept staring like he thought the plane might turn right back around and bring his dad home.

"He'll be back soon," Jack assured him.

Josh nodded, but he looked like he was holding back tears.

"Should we go home now or get something to eat?" Jack asked him. There was still a little time before Brenda would take over. She would be by the house later. Until then, Jack was in charge of Josh.

"Do you have work to do?" Josh asked.

"No. I cleared my schedule for the evening. Is there somewhere you want to go?"

Josh thought about it. "We can eat sandwiches and feed ducks."

"Where?" Jack asked.

Josh grew thoughtful. "I forgot the name."

"How will we find it?" Jack wondered.

Josh gave him his patented search me shrug, arms out, palms up.

"Who else knows about this place?" Jack asked as they walked out of the airport.

"Lots of people," Josh said unhelpfully.

"Does Brenda or Abby know?"

"Sure Abby knows. That's where she goes to school," Josh said.

"It's near the college?"

"Yes!"

"OK. Let's go find it," Jack said. He was relieved that he had a way to distract Josh from Gus's departure.

The next day was Friday, and Jack was bringing Josh from school for the first time. Jack felt a little overwhelmed as he watched Josh run to him in front of the school. When Josh took his hand, Jack's heart skipped a beat. Feelings of happiness and sadness entwined as he listened to Josh tell him the highlights of his day. One day Gina would go to school, and he wouldn't be there. As he made sure Josh was buckled in securely, Jack smiled at the bright eyed little boy looking up at him. He was the other half of what Jack felt. He was the happiness that fought back the gloom.

When Jack took him to the office at the bistro, Josh stared at his father's side of the desk with sad eyes.

"He'll be back soon" Jack assured him.

Josh nodded and put on a brave face. That's when Jack received a phone call from Brenda.

"Did you get Josh from school OK?" she asked. Jack thought she was just calling to check up on him, but then she said, "I hope you didn't make any plans for tonight."

"Without Gus here, not likely," Jack told her.

"Good. I need you to stay with Josh tonight and maybe tomorrow too. Gus said you would pitch in. I need to go out of town right away."

"I can stay with Josh. Is everything all right?"

"My dad just got arrested for possession," Brenda said. "He's an old style pothead. As the only responsible member of the family, I have to go hire a lawyer and all that. My mom is freaking out. Abby is visiting her boyfriend at his college this weekend, but she should be back by Sunday night."

"Of course. It's no trouble. You have a colorful family," Jack said to her.

"It's a whole family of Dougs. I'm the odd one out."

"Then they are lucky to have you," Jack told her.

As he got ready to give Josh the news, Jack found that he was both nervous and happy about the prospect of taking care of Josh. Somewhere in the back of his mind was the thought that this was good practice for when... Jack didn't allow himself to think further. But as he waited for news and worried about Liam as if he was a member of his own family, Jack couldn't lie to himself about that. As for Josh, his eyes lit up when he heard that Jack would be staying with him.

Gus had given Jack the key to the house just in case. When he took Josh home, he assured Jack, "Don't worry. I'll show you where everything is. Do you have a toothbrush? Do you have your pajamas?"

"I've slept over before," Jack reminded him.

"I know. But I want you to like it here, so you'll want to stay with us all the time," Josh said.

Jack was so touched, he could only smile. He felt like his heart was full.

Jack had a few things to put away so he headed to the bedrooms. He saw

that Brenda's things were in the only guest room. Since he was going to be there only one or two nights, Jack decided not to bother with it. He would sleep in Gus's bed like he always did. OK, he might have had other reasons as well. He missed Gus terribly. He wasn't sure if sleeping in his bed would make that better or worse. Probably both.

Before coming home, he and Josh had dinner at the bistro so Jack didn't have to worry about his limited cooking skills. He was hoping they would be able to Skype with Gus that evening, but they had to settle for a phone call.

Josh was happy to get to talk to his dad. "Is Uncle Liam going to be OK?"

"The doctors are taking good care of him," Gus told him.

Josh talked to him for a while then gave the phone to Jack.

"He's still holding on," Gus told Jack when he asked about Liam. "They have him on a ventilator. We're hoping he'll start breathing on his own. I know he will. He's strong. How is Josh doing?" Gus asked. He sounded tired and on edge.

"He's being brave. I'll do my best to keep him distracted," Jack said, but he knew Gus couldn't help but worry about his little boy. "I wish there was something I could do for you, or at least that I could hold you."

"It's good to know you're over there taking care of things. I'm glad you're staying with Josh. Don't let him boss you around."

"I don't know about that, but I'll try not to let him worry too much," Jack said.

"I know you can do it. Oh God, it's so good to hear your voice," Gus said suddenly.

Jack felt the same way. Hearing his voice from so far away made Jack long to touch him like never before. Their separation was almost physically painful. At the same time, he felt a connection like Gus could never be so far away that he was out of his reach. If he closed his eyes, he could feel the stubble on his jaw in the morning when Jack would brush his hand over it. Then he would skim his hands lower over his chest and feel Gus's nipples hardening under his fingertips.

When he hung up, Jack wanted to laugh at how mixed up he was. He felt both his absence and his presence in every fiber of his being. That's what Gus did to him. Even with him gone, Jack could see his life taking shape, becoming what he always wanted.

After the phone call, Jack tried to shake off the sound of Gus's voice and do some work. Josh watched a cartoon in the living room. Sitting at the dining room table, Jack listened to Josh laugh every few minutes. It was a sweet sound that made Jack smile.

A little later, Josh came up to him. "You work a lot, don't you?"

"I'll stop for a little while," Jack told him. "What would you like to do?"

"Let's play a game," Josh said and pulled out a box from under the living room sofa.

Opening it up, Josh introduced him to a made up game using the leftover pieces from a few different games and two game boards. The rules as Josh explained them were incomprehensible. As they played, Jack wasn't quite sure what the point of the game was, but Josh assured him that he was losing.

"You're a good loser," Josh praised him. "Dad tries to cheat and steal my pieces when I'm not looking, but I always catch him."

After the game, Josh wanted to look at New Zealand on the globe. He took Jack by the hand and pulled him to his room. The globe was on his desk next to toys, his books and papers from school.

"Dad showed me where he was going," Josh said. He took a little while to find New Zealand. "Dad is here."

Jack pointed out Wellington to him and told him, "That's the city where your dad is. I've never been there, but I did go here, to Auckland. It's warm there and there are a lot of big buildings." Inside those buildings was where Jack had spent most of his time. He remembered looking at the view of the harbor, wanting to spend some time on the water, then turning his eyes back to business.

"Where else did you go?" Josh wanted to know.

Jack pointed to Melbourne then to Kyoto and Yokohama. He let his finger tap a few other places in Europe and South America where he had been, mostly on business.

"You've been everywhere!" Josh said in astonishment.

"Not everywhere," Jack told him, but Josh was still impressed.

Jack wished he had done more during his travels so he would have some stories to tell Josh. Most of his trips were spent in conference rooms, restaurants, and hotel rooms, with his eyes glued to a computer screen instead of the scenery.

As Jack kicked himself for the missed opportunities, he noticed that Josh had grown thoughtful as well. The little guy stared at New Zealand on the globe for a long while. It was like Josh was willing everyone there to be OK.

That's when they saw lightning and heard thunder crash a few seconds later. Josh jumped and made a small, frightened sound. The thunder wasn't very loud, but Josh drew closer to Jack and stared wide-eyed out his window.

In the dark, Jack hadn't seen the storm coming. Another lightning strike lit up the night, and Josh clutched at Jack's arm. Just before thunder crashed again, Jack covered Josh's ears.

Rain was falling hard now as Jack and Josh sat on his bed.

"Too close," Josh said when the interval between the flash of lightning and the sound of thunder was only a few seconds.

Jack offered him his hand. "I think it would make me feel better if you

held my hand," he said to Josh.

"OK," Josh said and took Jack's hand. He kept on a very serious expression as he waited for the next sequence of lightning and thunder. After a while the lightning and thunder got further apart. The next ones were even more distant and faint.

"It sounds like it's moving away," Jack said.

Josh agreed with a nod. When all they could hear was the soft patter of rain, Josh breathed an exaggerated sigh of relief.

"How did I do?" Jack asked him.

"You did good. You didn't get scared at all."

"I knew we were safe."

"I knew we were safe too," Josh said despite his earlier fear.

It was close to Josh's bedtime. He got into his pajamas and brushed his teeth, but Jack could tell he didn't want to be alone in his bedroom after the storm. Jack let him sit and watch TV with him for a while. When he saw him start to nod off, he took him to his bedroom. By then it was well past his bedtime, and it didn't take him long to fall asleep.

Chapter 19

Next day Gus called early. It was midnight in New Zealand. Josh had only just woken up. This time they were able to Skype, and Josh was excited to see his dad.

"Your Uncle Liam is doing better," Gus told him.

Josh cheered and hugged Jack.

"Where's Uncle Liam?" Josh asked, leaning in toward the image of his dad on the laptop screen. "Can I see him?"

"He's sleeping right now. But I'll tell him you said hi," Gus told him. "Are you taking good care of Jack?"

"I am. I'm making him play and not just work all the time, and I'm not letting him skip dinner."

"That's my good boy. You miss me?" Gus asked.

"Lots and lots and lots and lots. And Jack misses you too. He was looking at your handsome picture," Josh tattled.

Gus laughed while Jack tried not to look guilty. Josh had already told Jack that Gus called the photo of him in an expensive black suit his handsome picture. Gus was younger then, and he did look stunning in that photo. The look in his eyes was sharp, both a warning and an invitation. If Jack didn't already know he was trouble, that brazen look would have told him so.

When he spoke to Gus from the bedroom so they could have some private time, Gus filled him in on Liam's condition.

"He's off the ventilator, breathing on his own. He's not awake yet, but he

will be," Gus said. He looked and sounded so relieved.

"That's so good to hear," Jack told him.

"I miss those eyes," Gus said as he gazed at Jack. "I've been looking at pictures of you on my phone every chance I get, but this is better. I wish I could kiss you right now."

"Me too."

"And what else would you want to do to me?" Gus asked in a teasing voice.

"I'll tell you when you come back."

"You're sleeping in my bed, right?" Gus asked.

"Yes. I didn't want to disturb Brenda's stuff," Jack told him.

"I'm sure that was the reason," Gus said in a "who are you kidding?" tone. Then his voice got thick. "Seeing you just makes me greedy. I want to touch you and feel your body heat up while I kiss and grope you."

"You look tired," Jack noticed. He knew that Gus wouldn't be taking care of himself and that made him worry.

"Is that your way of cutting me down to size?" Gus asked.

"It's my way of telling you to rest."

Gus smiled weakly. "I can't sleep. I just need to know Liam is going to be OK." Gus rubbed his hand over his tired face.

"There's been improvement. And there'll be more," Jack told him. He wanted to reach through the screen and hold him.

"When I see Liam like that, I want to yell at him, 'Shake it off. You're a Dwyer. So what if half a building fell on you.'"

"I think that's against medical advice."

"The doctors are impressed with how he's doing," Gus said. "I'm just judging him more harshly because I know what kind of man he is."

"Don't push yourself. Get some rest," Jack urged him.

"Is that an order?" The look on Gus's face promised trouble.

"If you want it to be," Jack said.

"I'm going to fantasize so hard about you," Gus threatened.

"Save it for when you can show me and get some sleep instead."

Jack hated to end the call. Closing his eyes, he conjured up Gus in bed with him. He indulged himself only for a moment. There was a whole day ahead of him.

His plan was to take Josh out for breakfast and maybe to a movie before they went to the bistro. That would serve to keep him busy and keep him fed. Jack did look up some recipes for healthy, nutritious meals he might make for dinner, but they scared him.

That night was Jack's second night staying with Josh. Josh had been in bed for a while, and Jack had made sure he was sound asleep before he went to do some work in the dining room. Close to midnight, he heard Josh

puttering around.

Jack found him in the hallway, peering into Gus's bedroom.

"Why are you awake?" Jack asked him. "Did something scare you?"

"No. My brain is just awake," Josh said pointing to his head.

"You put your brain to sleep by lying down and closing your eyes," Jack said, leading him back to his bedroom. "Want me to sit with you?"

"Can we watch TV like last night?" Josh asked with a hopeful expression.

"No. It's very late and you need your sleep."

Josh sighed as he climbed into his bed. Bringing the chair from the corner closer to his bed, Jack sat down.

"Then we'll listen to music," Josh said. He leaned over and reached for the iPod. Josh went through the playlist until he found a particular song. "This is Dad's favorite," he said as the song "I'll Try Something New" by The Miracles started to play.

"Do you know what this song is about?" Jack asked.

"Yes. You always have to keep trying. Dwyers never give up! That's how I know Uncle Liam is going to be OK," Josh said and laid back down.

Jack tucked him in and smiled. When the song ended, Jack played it again. The old song reminded Jack of how his father used to play Pablo Milanes and Tania Libertad singing "El Primer Amor". That was an old song too. It was old even when it played in that little bar in Puerto Vallarta where his parents met.

After Jack's mother died, his father played the song over and over again. Jack only heard it through the closed door as he sat in the hallway outside his parents' bedroom. He would sit there waiting for his father to come out until the nanny or one of the maids shooed him away.

But Jack needed to hear the music so he knew that his father was still there. As a seven year old boy, he didn't understand how his mother could be gone so suddenly. She told Jack, "Your dad is taking me out tonight, so I'm going to go and make myself pretty." She kissed his cheek and drove away. Later that day, the police were telling his father about a car crash, and he was sobbing. It was a terrible sound Jack had never heard before.

After that, the house fell into a silence. That's why Jack sat outside that door where the music was playing. He missed the sound of his mother's voice and especially her laugh. It didn't seem possible that he would never hear or see her again. He could still hear her telling him the story of how she met his father.

They met in Puerto Vallarta where Jack's mother was on summer vacation after her senior year in college. Jack's father was there on business. Jack's mother told him that when she first saw Alex Velarde in that smoky, little bar, he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen, and her heart flew to him like a bird.

"That's why this is such a special old song. It takes me right back to that moment," his mother said.

Now that his mother was gone, Jack knew his father played the song so he could see her again. Jack wanted to see her too. If he couldn't, at least he needed to see his dad. But once he stopped playing the song and finally came out, his father seemed different. He never smiled and he only had time for work. When he looked at Jack, an unbearably sad look would come into his eyes. He would turn away as if seeing Jack hurt him.

When he lost Gina, Jack could look back at his father then and see a reflection of himself. Jack didn't know how to deal with his loss any more than his father did. So many years later, Jack felt that he finally understood him.

Trying to bring himself back to the present, Jack looked at Josh as he slept. But he couldn't really see him as the past resurfaced again, and he saw Gina asleep in her pink bed. She was so small. Even as he closed his eyes, Jack could see her. Jack opened his eyes to the dim room, a little boy's room with Iron Man sheets, a globe on his desk, and the iPod and the speaker on his nightstand. He reminded himself that Gina was with her parents, and that right now Josh needed him. Jack had to be strong and steady for him so that when Josh got scared, he could look to him and know that everything was going to be all right.

As he sat and Josh slept, Jack thought about Gus and seeing him the first time. He understood what his mother was trying to tell him about meeting his father – how a heart flies where it wants to be, how it has a will of its own. His heart had flown to Gus and that's where it would always be. Jack's heart was with Gus right now while he was so far away, but it was also here with Josh because he owned a part of it too. Or more like he had stolen it and ran off with it. Father and son, they were both Jack's life now. They had reached him right through the fear that was suffocating him. Now Jack wanted to be a man worthy of them.

Sunday, when Jack and Josh were at the bistro, Brenda called again.

"How long can you stay with Josh? I need to stay here for a day or two longer, and Abby can't make it back tonight."

"It's no problem," Jack said.

"Good. Abby called me. She had car trouble and has to stay over until her car is fixed."

"That's fine. I can stay as long as you need me to," Jack assured her.

After he told her how Josh was doing and made sure she had the latest news about Liam, Jack went to find Josh. He was sitting on that stepstool in the corner of the kitchen and watching the dinner prep. At this rate, he was going to know more about cooking than Jack.

"That's good," Josh said when Jack told him he would stay with him another day.

"It's good that Abby's car broke down," Jack teased him.

"No. But now you don't have to go back to your hotel."

"I'm glad about that too. So what should we do?"

Josh thought hard then he shrugged.

"When we go home, we can order a pizza," Jack suggested.

"Yes!"

After they went home and had pizza for dinner, Josh took Jack on a guided tour of his neighborhood. There were a lot of older, brick houses sitting under giant, old trees. The yards were big but not always well maintained. They saw other people walking around, many of them walking their dogs. Josh looked at the dogs enviously. Whenever Josh recognized someone, he wanted to stop and introduce Jack.

"This is Jack. He's my friend and Dad's boyfriend and his boss too. He's not afraid of anything. He went everywhere, and he crashed in a plane."

Most of the neighbors were amused rather than impressed. Kids around Josh's age did look at Jack in wonder while Josh smiled proudly.

Once they got home, Jack asked, "What should we do now?"

"We can have a snack," Josh said as he ran into the kitchen.

"Are you hungry already?" Jack hadn't expected it after all the pizza Josh ate earlier.

"Not really. My mouth is bored. We can have soda. Soda is good for that."

They looked in the fridge, but there wasn't any.

"Let's see if we can make our own soda," Jack said after a few bottles in the fridge gave him an idea.

"You know how?" Josh asked.

"We'll see if we have what we need. We have club soda, orange juice and grape juice. Do you have any Kool-Aid?"

"Yes!" Josh pointed to a cupboard.

"Cherry. That's a good one."

Jack poured half a glass of juice and filled the rest with club soda. As they each became fizzy, Josh clapped. After a taste test, Josh declared them all good. Kool-Aid soda was his favorite. Since Josh had fun, Jack decided to buy him a soda machine if Gus approved.

As Josh finished his homemade soda, he caught Jack looking at the Dwyer family photos, which were all over the house. Setting his glass down, Josh ran and opened a sideboard in the dining room. Pulling out an album, he took it over to Jack. They sat down on the couch to look at it.

"This is my first album ever," Josh said as he opened it up. He narrated as he turned the pages. The first picture was a sonogram. "Here I am inside the womb. I'm very small there." Next was a picture of Suzanne looking more casual than in the other picture of her Jack had seen. "This is Suzanne. She's my mom and the best friend Dad ever had. I'm inside there." Josh pointed to

Suzanne's belly. "Dad was with me even when I was inside Suzanne's tummy. Here he is. He's talking to me and patting my head." It was a picture of Gus with his hand on Suzanne's belly. His head was inclined like he was listening. "And then I came out, and I met my dad. Here I am crying, and he's smiling. And then we shook hands. Dad shook my hand, and I shook his finger. 'Nice to meet you, Son.' 'Nice to meet you, Dad.'" In the pictures with the newborn Josh, Gus looked giddy and on the verge of tears. Jack tried not to think of holding Gina for the first time.

"If I didn't have a pretty great Dad already, I'd want you to be my dad," Josh said suddenly, startling Jack.

"Really?"

"Aha. Maybe if you and Dad get married, you can adopt me. That's what happened to Sonora. But she didn't get another dad. She got another mom. She said when she and her moms did the adoption, everybody cried. But we won't cry, right?" Josh asked. He peered at Jack, waiting for an answer.

"Right," Jack said, not knowing what else to say. It wasn't true though. He was sure to cry if he ever got to have Josh as his son.

Monday morning Jack got to take Josh to school. It was a sunny morning with heavy traffic. Josh counted the time at all the red lights. In front of the school, Josh told him he did a good job driving. He hugged Jack before he ran inside. For a while Jack just stood there with the happy and sad feelings battling inside him. Whenever the past and the present crossed, he was filled with a mixture of regret and hope. As Jack was about to drive away, Abby texted him to say she was back and could stay with Josh that night.

"Sorry I couldn't come back sooner," she said.

"It's no problem. It wasn't an inconvenience." That was an understatement. He was happy to take care of Josh. He would have told her he could keep doing it, but he didn't want to overstep.

Now that he wouldn't be staying with Josh, Jack felt a little down. He would still get to pick up Josh from school and spend time with him at the bistro. And Gus was returning tomorrow, so he had a lot to look forward to.

It was late when Gus's flight landed the next day, but Jack still took Josh to the airport with him. Jack couldn't deny him that. He did insist that Josh take a nap that evening after dinner, but the little guy was too wound up to sleep much.

At the airport, the excitement on Josh's face was infectious. He was bouncing in place, afraid to blink or he might miss the first sight of his dad.

Jack got impatient to see Gus as well. It seemed like it had been years not days. The tightening in his chest was both sweet and painful. The ache got almost unbearable as he searched for Gus among other passengers. Then there he was, looking tired and a little disheveled, not exactly clean-shaven, and he was still the most beautiful sight Jack had ever seen.

Chapter 20

Gus left New Zealand after hardly having seen it. Wellington seemed like a beautiful city from the few glimpses Gus had of the place. Its appeal was only at the edges of Gus's vision. His focus had been on Liam.

It was strange to see Liam in a hospital bed, depending on machines to breathe for him. Hardly any of him was visible under casts and bandages. Gus mostly recognized him by his size. When it came to working construction, Liam used to say, "I'm building muscle and getting paid for it." It was hard to believe that was the same Liam who was now so close to dying.

The saddest sight of all was seeing Liam's girls come to visit him. They urged him to get better soon. Hearing them, Gus was sure that their sweet voices would bring him back.

At least Gus got to see his parents after so long. During the long hours spent outside Liam's hospital room, they tentatively asked Gus a few questions about Josh, but nothing about himself. They didn't want to know about his life. Gus didn't make an issue of it, but he told them about Jack anyway. Disapproval was written all over their faces.

"You should think about what's best for your son," his mother said under her breath and turned away.

Gus didn't bother telling them that Jack had quickly become Josh's favorite person. The only other person who had won him over as quickly was Grandpa Lyle.

His father stared at Gus for a moment, but then he turned away too. Seeing them like that, Gus wondered if they would ever accept him.

He looked over at Liam's hospital room. Unlike their parents, he had accepted Gus without hesitation. Hearing he was gay, Liam had clapped Gus on the back and said, "Pussy rules, but if I was gay, I would be bagging them left and right. You are going to have to work for it."

For a while Liam refused to keep in touch with their parents because they rejected Gus. Liam was traveling all over the world then. Mom and Dad had to be worried sick when they didn't hear from him. Gus didn't want that and got him to at least take their calls. But things between Liam and their parents were still strained. Liam's loyal streak ran too deep for him to let go of his grudge, not as long as Gus was out of their lives. Gus did love him for it. It was one more reason he couldn't face losing him.

Once his brother started getting better, Gus said to himself, "Now that's the Liam I know."

He improved all the time. It still wasn't easy for Gus to leave while Liam was still so weak. He was well enough to croakily say to Gus, "Go home to

your kid and your hunk before he figures out he can do better."

Every word he said, no matter how dickish, made Gus want to cry. Only a few days before, he wasn't sure if Liam would live. Then there was the fear that there might be brain damage or other serious impairments. To hear him sounding like himself was more than Gus could hope for. It gave him the push he needed to go back home knowing that Liam would be OK.

Getting off the plane, Gus was still tired though he had slept through the greater part of the flight home. Mostly, he was emotionally spent. Even as he longed to see Josh and Jack, he was afraid that he might fall apart at the first sight of them and start bawling his eyes out. Just the thought of seeing them was almost his undoing.

Then there they were. Josh was jumping in place, holding Jack's hand and waving while Jack smiled like an angel. Gus thought his heart might burst seeing the two people he loved most together like that.

With a little squeal, Josh jumped up into his arms and hugged him tightly. Gus called him my sweet boy and squeezed him. As Josh hung on to him fiercely, it took all of Gus's willpower not to cry. Still holding on to Josh, Gus reached with one arm to pull Jack into the hug.

"Welcome back," Jack said in a tight, low voice.

"Did you guys miss me?" Gus asked, looking into two sets of happy, teary eyes.

"Yes," they both said.

"But we helped each other not to be too sad," Josh said and smiled at Jack.

Once they got to the car, Jack asked Gus, "Do you want to sit in the back with Josh? It's so late. You're not going to get to spend much time together tonight otherwise."

"Yes. Sit with me," Josh urged him.

"You have a booster seat for me?" Gus asked.

"You don't need one," Josh told him. He took hold of his hand and dragged him toward the back door.

"Jack will be lonely all by himself in the front," Gus said. He wished they were taking a cab so they could all sit together.

"He won't be lonely. We'll talk to him," Josh said.

"I'll be OK," Jack assured them and threw a wry look in Gus's direction.

"Don't worry. Me and Dad will never let you get lonely," Josh promised as Jack buckled him in.

Hearing him, Jack became still. To Gus it seemed like he might have been holding his breath. Jack looked like he knew that Josh's promise came straight from the heart and encompassed Jack's whole life.

While they drove home, Gus told Josh and Jack about his trip and then

some stories about Liam's adventures abroad. Once they got to the house, Gus hated to send Josh to bed, but it was too late for him to stay up any longer.

"OK, it's past your bedtime," he told him.

"Not yet," Josh pleaded.

"Fine, it's Jack's bedtime," Gus said.

"No, he's a grown-up. He can stay up late," Josh said.

"Well, you can't. Come on. I'll tell you one more story after you're in bed," Gus promised him.

"OK," Josh agreed reluctantly. Before he went off to get ready, he ran up to Jack and hugged him.

"You're going to be sleeping over, right?" Josh said.

"Yes. You'll see him in the morning," Gus said and grinned at Jack.

With Josh in bed and fast asleep, Gus went to the bedroom with Jack.

"You're not too tired?" Jack asked seeing that Gus was all over him as soon as the door was closed.

"Are you saying you would let me off the hook if I was?" Gus asked while he kissed Jack's neck.

"Yes," Jack mumbled, starting to breathe hard. He was such a good boyfriend, but Gus didn't want him to be too good tonight. He kissed Jack, trailing his hand down his back to his ass. Gus took his mouth away from Jack's reluctantly. Feeling up his ass, Gus nuzzled his neck.

"I've been dreaming about you too much. I'm dying for you," Gus told him. However tired he was, he had to be with Jack tonight. Both his body and his heart demanded it. "I made sure to sleep on the plane so I would be rested up for this." With those words, Gus swooped in for a kiss. Jack melted into him and moaned into the kiss. Jack's hand moved to the back of his neck, drawing him in deeper. He clutched at Gus, tugging at his hair to keep him close.

Gus broke off the kiss to breathe and to say, "I missed you."

"Show me," Jack demanded and pressed himself up against Gus.

Gus moaned at the contact of Jack's hard body. Jack's erection jabbed into his own, inspiring Gus to grind against him. After days of being deprived, the feel of Jack was intoxicating. "You don't even know what you're asking for," Gus said as he stripped Jack roughly then pulled him close to kiss him all over.

While Gus's mouth traveled Jack's body, Jack undressed him too. He grabbed lube and condoms and threw them on the bed. Moving down his body, Gus dropped to his knees in front of him. He was groping Jack, sucking him, nearly making him come until Jack pushed him away.

He didn't stop there. When Gus stood up, Jack pushed him down on the bed and straddled him. Gus slid his hands up Jack's thighs. Leaning over him, Jack kissed him. The pressure of his mouth was so sweet, but Jack didn't let it last. He shoved lube in Gus's hand. Obeying his need, Gus lubed him while

Jack put a condom on him hurriedly.

Gus was breathing hard as Jack angled his body to align his ass with Gus's cock. Gus couldn't believe that he had been bone tired and he still couldn't let himself go to sleep without fucking Jack. He was addicted, in love, in lust and insane. Whatever it took, he had to have him.

He gripped Jack's hips and guided him down over his rock-hard erection. Jack's teeth were gritted as his body sheathed Gus's cock. The heat and pressure enveloping him were incredible and Gus groaned. Jack covered his mouth with his hand and started riding him slowly. Encouraged by Gus's groping, Jack's body rose and fell above him, tight, lean and beautiful.

*

Jack could have come as soon as he felt Gus inside him. Being without Gus had left him in such a state of need, but he held off, wanting to savor the fuck. With both of them primed by days of separation, the fuck was too intense to last.

As Jack started to feel the coiling pressure inside him that told him he was close, he rode Gus even harder. Silently, he was begging Gus to come, share the moment with him. Then Jack felt the climax overtaking him and his come spilled over Gus's chest. Throwing his head back, Gus growled and pushed up into Jack hard as he came. Jack collapsed on top of him. Reaching over to the nightstand, Jack grabbed a handful of tissues and cleaned up Gus's chest as Gus got rid of the condom.

"I could sleep forever," Gus said as Jack lowered himself next to him.

Jack could see that he had exhausted him, but he also saw the smile that just wouldn't leave Gus's face. It was there even as his eyes closed and he fell into a heavy, exhausted sleep. As he drifted off in his arms, Jack clung to the feeling of Gus's body against his and the familiar scent of his skin.

Chapter 21

Next morning, after offering to take Josh to school, Jack insisted that Gus sleep late. Hearing that his father was still sleeping, Josh tiptoed around the house instead of making a racket for once. Jack took Josh to school, and Gus joined him at the bistro around noon.

As soon as Jack laid eyes on him he came over to give him a hug and a long kiss.

"I was dead to the world until ten minutes ago. That's what you did to me," Gus accused him as he went toward the coffeemaker.

"You started it, and it's not me. It's jetlag. Let me do that," Jack said taking the coffee pot from him and pouring him a cup.

"It's mostly you. You're insatiable," Gus told him.

"You look better already," Jack said as he looked at him closely. He still looked tired, but he was clean-shaven at least.

"The word you're looking for is gorgeous," Gus corrected him. "I'm just happy to be back and that Liam is going to be OK."

"Me too," Jack said and gave him another hug.

As he held him in his arms, Gus gazed at him for a long moment.

"Being so far away was a lot easier on me knowing you were here taking care of Josh. Thank you."

"Josh was great."

"You did so much more than I expected. Was it hard?"

"No. It was good," Jack said with a smile.

*

After the ordeal of fearing the worst for Liam, Gus found it wonderful to get back to his routine. It didn't hurt that his routine now included his gorgeous boss and boyfriend hanging around all the time. The hard part was keeping his hands and his mouth off Jack when they were working. At the bistro, Jack still had that all business, deadly serious vibe. That severe attitude just made Gus want to pin him down on his desk and fuck the living hell out of him. Jack made him want to be a bad man and a bad example to their employees.

To top it off, whenever Jack caught him leering at him, he would glare at Gus. Didn't Jack know that his look had "fuck me now" written all over it?

"You're such a tease," Gus accused him.

"No one is teasing you," Jack claimed. "You're worse than ever. Get back to work."

"Yes, sir. But you can't expect me to be without you for days without going through withdrawal. Now tell me you're coming home with me tonight," Gus demanded.

"Fine," Jack said as if he agreed only grudgingly. If Jack loved going home with him half as much as Gus did, then they were in a good place.

It was a hectic day at work for Gus. Jack kept him on his toes. That evening, coming home with Jack and Josh was a sweet ending to Gus's first full day back. It more than made up for Jack's slave driver attitude at the bistro.

At home, while Gus was busy with calls to New Zealand, Jack got busy in the kitchen. That's where Gus found him pulling some stuff from the fridge.

"I guess you want to stay over for dinner," Gus said, teasing him.

"I want to stay over and sleep with you," Jack said. He sounded kind of impatient for it.

"Are you saying you missed me?" Gus sidled up to him and pressed

himself against Jack from behind.

"I said what I wanted to say. You can interpret it however you like."

"Oh, I will," Gus said. He grabbed hold of him roughly and turned him around, but he had to let him go when Josh walked in.

"Are you picking on Jack?" Josh asked.

"You don't need to protect him," Gus said, leaning down so he was face to face with Josh. "I'm his boyfriend. I'll protect him."

"You better," Josh told him.

"No one needs to protect me," Jack grumbled.

Then Gus told Josh that Jack was staying overnight again, and Josh was thrilled.

"You should stay with us every night, right Dad?" Josh said.

"You have my vote," Gus told him.

Josh smiled at both Gus and Jack.

"So he was a good babysitter?" Gus asked seeing from his look that Josh was even more attached to Jack than before.

"The best," Josh said.

"Better than Abby?" Gus asked.

"Yeah," Josh said but looked a little guilty about demoting his former favorite babysitter.

"We'll keep that between us," Gus told him. Josh agreed that was best.

After dinner followed by popcorn while they watched movies, Gus put Josh to bed. Josh wasn't too sleepy when he got under the covers. Gus sat with him for a while so they could talk a little. He had been so busy catching up at work, now he wanted to spend some time catching up with Josh. Mainly Gus wanted to enjoy just being his dad. He wasn't used to being away from him and missed the little guy.

"I got to go to work with Jack," Josh told him.

"The place is still standing. I guess you did a good job."

"And there was a storm," Josh said getting more serious.

"How did that go?" he asked.

"Jack did great. He didn't get scared, so I didn't get too scared either."

"Sounds good," Gus said with a grin.

"We played soda factory."

"So Jack knows how to have fun?"

"I taught him how," Josh said, not shy about taking credit. He acted like he had single-handedly discovered Jack and made him the man he was today.

"Wasn't he ever strict with you?" Gus wanted to know.

"Not so much. He was good."

"Were you good?" Gus gave him a sideways look.

"Yes, I was a good kid for Jack."

"That's my boy."

Gus was proud of both of them. It wasn't easy for Josh to be left behind

while Gus went so far away. It was a credit to his little boy's courage that he handled it so well. Gus was proud of Jack as well. He had certainly come a long way from being afraid to spend any time with Josh to being the one who could ease his worst fears.

Josh then got thoughtful and looked up at Gus very seriously.

"Dad, you like having me as your kid, right?"

"Why do you ask?" Gus said, smiling at the unexpected question.

"Just making sure I'm doing a good job."

"Are you bucking for a raise?"

"What?"

"Yes. I like having you as my kid. You get an A+ in being my kid."

Josh looked pleased and gave him a hug. "I like having you as my dad too. You are doing a good job. A++."

Gus got a clue as to why Josh might have asked him that odd question when he sat with Jack in the living room to talk over the last few days. They were sitting close with their fingers entwined. Since they would be spending the night together, there was an undercurrent of anticipation between them.

"Josh said you weren't strict." Gus raised an eyebrow at Jack.

"I was reasonably strict," Jack said defensively.

"You were a total wuss, weren't you?" Gus accused him.

"He is a good kid. I didn't need to be strict," Jack said trying to maintain his image as a hardass, but that was a lost cause. "There's something you should know. Josh was talking to me about adopting him," Jack said with a concerned frown.

Gus nodded with approval. "That's a boy who knows what he wants, just like his dad."

"Aren't you worried I'll disappoint him?" Jack said, looking surprised that Gus was a hundred percent on board.

He shouldn't have been. When Gus looked into the future, he saw the two of them raising Josh together, and that was just to start with.

"Of all the people in the world, you're the one I'm most sure of," Gus said looking at Jack with love and confidence.

"Shouldn't you be more cautious?" Jack asked him.

"You're cautious enough for both of us. You worry, and I'll have complete faith in you. We'll be all set, a perfect couple," Gus declared.

*

Jack was surprised that Gus had no reservations about Jack adopting Josh. It wasn't something they needed to worry about yet. Josh was an amazing kid with a big heart. He deserved a great dad like Gus. Though Gus might have confidence in him, Jack didn't have confidence in himself as a father. He couldn't help but think that Josh deserved better.

"I wasn't a good father to Gina."

"Don't worry. Josh won't let you get away with that," Gus told him.

"I noticed." Jack grinned thinking of the irrepressible Josh. He did have Jack wrapped around his little finger. "I always held back from my family, worked too much. I only realized how much I wanted to be a father when I lost Gina. But I also swore I'd never do that to myself again."

"And here you are."

"You undid all my resolutions. You have this incredible power over me. In some strange way I think you remind me of my mother."

"Umm. How should I take that?" Gus asked, narrowing his eyes at Jack.

"You make a family. I don't have that in me. My father didn't either. My mother made us a family. Once she was gone, we were just two people who happened to be related."

"I think you sell yourself short."

"Maybe. But I think you're the luckiest man I know."

"I feel that way too," Gus said. "I have Josh, Liam is on the mend, and there's this new man in my life who's great with my kid. You'll have to settle for third place for now. Once Liam is a hundred percent, you'll move up to second. Josh will always have gold. Can you settle for silver?" Gus asked.

"There's no shame in coming second to Josh."

Gus smiled as he looked over at photos of Josh, which were everywhere.

"I didn't even know he was shopping for another dad. Last year's model not good enough?" Gus said.

"You're pretending to be jealous while I'm the jealous one," Jack pointed out to him.

"Josh already picked you as his next dad. You're in. And maybe I kind of like you too. Maybe I want to give you everything and make you happy," Gus said looking at Jack slyly.

"I'm happy enough for now. Happier than I ever expected to be," Jack admitted.

"Ha! Not if you're not waking up to this every day," Gus said while pointing to himself.

Jack had to smile at the truth of that. He wanted Gus every morning and every night. Feeling greedy, he wondered if Gus was really ready to give him so much of himself. As he leaned against Gus more fully, he felt the strength and warmth of his body. He wanted to be even closer with nothing between them. While he yearned for the man right next to him, Jack noticed Gus gazing at him.

"You amaze me, you know," Gus said. "After what you went through, I know it can't be easy for you to throw yourself into a life with us."

"If you two are willing to give me a chance, I have to do my part."

"I just want you to know that I know what it's like to hand your heart to a child," Gus said with understanding in his eyes. "It's crazy to hand it to a little kid, who can't even walk, and say, 'Don't break this.' It's getting broken sooner

or later, that's a given. But I just have to see that goofy grin on Josh's face, and there's my heart. It's broken and it's safe."

As Jack leaned against Gus's chest, he listened to the strong, steady beating of his heart. He felt like his own matched it beat for beat.

For the last few years, Jack had lived his life like a shard of glass, a jagged piece of the man he once was. He never expected that he could find a place where he was wanted and where he fit perfectly.

Gus and Josh were the first thing he thought of every morning as soon as he woke up. In his mind, those two were already his family, his world. It was funny to think that waking up to Josh demolishing something while Gus groaned in his ear was his dream come true.

In the morning, Gus was calling New Zealand while Jack made coffee. The noise that woke them up that morning had been Josh trying to make popcorn balls. After looking up a recipe, Jack decided to help him with his project. It wasn't too difficult.

Now they admired their work – five sticky popcorn balls with M&M's and peanuts lined up on a tray.

"If we don't make something else, I'm afraid this will be our breakfast," Jack said to Josh.

Josh had no objections to that plan. He ran from the kitchen to tell Gus that popcorn balls were for breakfast.

"Says who?" Gus asked.

"Jack."

"He's paraphrasing," Jack said as Gus came into the kitchen and went over to Jack for a kiss. "Just getting creative with some leftover popcorn from last night."

"We don't usually have leftover popcorn. We have popcorn that gets eaten, popcorn that gets spilled on the carpet, and popcorn that goes under the couch cushions."

"I guess I didn't eat my share," Jack said.

"He's making good stuff," Josh said then he spotted a paper that Jack had left on the kitchen counter. It was just an agreement that needed his signature. What got Josh's attention was Jack's name. He looked at it curiously.

"Is this your middle name?" he asked Jack while he pointed at his full name.

"No. It's a last name," Jack told him.

"How many last names do you have?" Josh asked.

"Three. My full name is Jackson Vaughn Diaz Velarde."

"That sounds like four last names," Gus told him.

Josh turned to his father. "Why do I have only two names?"

"Maybe Jack will adopt you. Then you'll be Joshua Dwyer Vaughn Diaz Velarde."

Going wide-eyed, Josh turned from Gus to Jack. "You told him," he

protested.

"Of course he did," Gus said.

"I didn't know it was a secret," Jack said apologetically.

"I guess it's OK if Dad knows," Josh said with a pout.

"Did you think you could get yourself another dad behind my back?" Gus asked.

"No. I was going to tell you," Josh assured him. "I just thought when you got married, Jack could adopt me like Sonora's mom adopted her."

"So you have us marrying too." Gus looked over at Jack. "You didn't tell me that part." He grinned at both Jack and Josh. "That's my boy," Gus said and hugged Josh for his initiative.

Jack's eyes got teary as Josh reached over and pulled him into the hug.

Chapter 22

Gus had gone to get Josh from school. Jack was busy in the bistro office finalizing a deal. These days he liked to get all his work done before going home with Gus and Josh.

"This is an interesting office."

Jack jumped hearing the voice and turned to see his father standing in the doorway.

"Dad," Jack said, getting up. "Is something wrong?" He started to worry about what his father's sudden appearance might mean.

"No. It's a surprise visit," his father said as he came in and eyed the very humble office with an amused look.

"You don't do surprises," Jack reminded him.

"But your stepmother does. She changed our travel plans to include a stopover here."

"And you had no say?" Jack said. he knew that not even Christine could get him to do something if he didn't agree.

"I wanted to see you," his father said. "I was hoping we could have a late lunch. Doug has been updating Christine about you, and she shared the news with me. You are seeing a man named Gus Dwyer?"

Jack was stunned for a moment. He hadn't even thought about how he would tell his father. He should have known Doug would beat him to it.

"That's true," Jack managed to say before Josh ran in then stopped short on seeing someone new in the office.

"Who's this?" Josh asked as he came in. He was looking up at Jack's father curiously.

"This is my father," Jack told him. "Dad, this is Josh Dwyer."

"Nice to meet you, young man," his father said.

Without saying anything yet, Josh studied him closely, tilting his head this

way and that. Then he turned to Jack. "What do I call him?"

"You can call him Mr. Velarde, or you can call him Alex," Jack told him.

Josh looked at Jack's father again and decided, "I'm going to call him Alex." Josh put out his hand for a handshake. "Hi, I'm Josh. Nice to meet you." He pumped Jack's father's hand hard.

"Nice to meet you too," Jack's father said and smiled down at him.

"Are you interrupting?" Gus asked Josh as he came in carrying Josh's book bag.

Jack introduced Gus and his father. As he did, he wondered what his father would think of Gus.

"We can get out of here if you..." Gus started to say.

"No need, we'll be going to lunch," Jack told him.

"Actually, I'd like to eat here," his father said.

Jack was surprised, but it seemed to be the day for that.

"The pressure is on," Gus said. "I'll let the kitchen know who they need to impress."

"I'd like you to join us. If you have time," Jack's father said.

"Oh, I'll make time." Gus smiled at Jack wickedly.

"And your son as well, if you don't mind," Jack's father said.

Josh looked from him to Gus, who agreed.

"Do you want them to make anything special?" Gus asked after they sat together in the dining room.

"I'll order from the menu," Jack's father said. He looked over the dinner menu as well. "I would like to see at least one lobster dish."

"No lobster!" Josh yelled.

"Sorry," Gus said after Josh's uncharacteristic outburst startled both Jack and his father. "I promised Josh that we would never cook lobster."

"They boil them alive. That hurts. It's mean. My friend Sonora told me, and it made me sad," Josh said then he stared hard at Jack's father.

Noticing the intent way Josh looked at him, he didn't know what to make of it.

"He probably wants you to promise not to eat lobster," Gus guessed, and Josh nodded to confirm it.

Jack didn't wait to hear how his father would phrase his refusal. Jack made an offer to Josh, "How about if I promise never to eat lobster instead?"

Josh jumped out of his chair and came over to hug Jack. He gave him a good long squeeze then grinned up at him with approval.

"Is that going to be worth giving up lobster?" Gus asked, seeing Jack smile.

"Yes," Jack told him. Josh gave him and even bigger grin. He looked so happy and that was worth anything.

"In that case, I'll give up lobster too," Jack's father said.

Shocked, Jack just stared at him.

Josh ran around the table to him and said, "I'm going to hug him too." Josh put his arms around Jack's father and looked up at him. "You're a good dad just like my dad," he said.

"Do I qualify for one of those hugs you're giving out?" Gus asked.

"Yes." Josh went over to him.

Gus gave him a big hug and called him "my tender hearted boy."

Jack turned to his father and saw a wistful smile on his face. He knew his father had a deeply buried sentimental streak, but it had been a long time since he had seen any sign of it. It had been there when Jack's mother was alive, and Gina had brought it out in him briefly. Now Josh was working his magic on his father too. Jack wanted to warn his father to watch out or Gus and Josh would take over his life and make it wonderful.

After lunch, Jack and Gus took his father on a tour of the bistro. Josh acted as the tour guide. Gus and Josh stayed in the kitchen to watch dinner preparations and give Jack some time alone with his father. They went back to the office.

"You do your work from here?" Jack's father said, looking around at the very underwhelming space.

"All I need is a laptop and a desk," Jack said. He didn't want to tell his father how much he liked sharing an office with Gus, never knowing when he might come over for a kiss or a grope.

"I'm glad Christine changed our plans. I haven't seen you smile in a long time," his father said. "And to see you smile as much as you did today..." He trailed off, but Jack could tell it meant a lot to him.

"Don't tell me you approve of Gus."

"Him, no. But I didn't even know your eyes could shine like that." His father's expression grew sad even as he smiled. "Until today, your happiness seemed like something I might dream about but never see."

"I thought the same thing, except I didn't even dream of being happy until I met Gus," Jack told him.

"Can you make it last?" his father said as if he was begging Jack to make his dream real.

"With Gus, yes," Jack said decisively.

"And his little boy," his father added.

"He's a joy I never expected to find after..."

They were both silent for a moment as they shared the pain of loss.

"I'm glad for you."

After his father stepped out, Jack was standing by his desk, looking over his emails when Gus came in and pulled him into his arms.

"So that's what you're going to look like in twenty five years or so. Not bad," Gus said. "Gives me something to look forward to."

Jack had often thought the same thing whenever he saw his father.

"My father is still here," Jack said as Gus kissed his neck.

Gus stopped kissing him and turned to see Jack's father in the doorway.

"I thought I saw you leaving," Gus said to him.

"I was waiting for my wife outside." His father's expression was half disapproving, half amused.

"Oh, well," Gus told him. "I'm all over Jack day and night. You were bound to catch us sooner or later."

Jack groaned while Gus grinned.

"Uptight people bring out the devil in me," Gus said to Jack, who wondered if he was blushing. "You should know that."

That's when Jack's stepmother, Christine, breezed in. She was just as blond and sparkling as Doug, and she didn't look a day older than her son. She kissed Jack on the cheek.

"A relationship looks so good on you. You're handsomer than ever," she told Jack. "Your doing, I assume," she said and went up to Gus. He got a kiss on the cheek too.

"Who's this lady?" Josh asked as he came in with Doug.

"That's my mom," Doug told him. "We've been spending some quality time together. This is Gus's son, Josh," he said to his mother.

"My goodness," Christine said, crouching down to get a better look at Gus's little boy. "You are going to steal so many hearts," she predicted while Josh looked confused.

"He just needs to grow some teeth first," Gus told her.

"I'm working on it," Josh said and showed him a tooth that was coming in.

"That looks like it's going to be a good one," Gus told him, and Josh smiled proudly then got shy when he saw that everyone was looking at him. Gus riffled his hair and pulled him close.

When he and Gus were alone that night in Gus's living room, Jack told him, "In a million years I wouldn't expect my father to approve."

"I charmed him," Gus claimed.

"Josh charmed him," Jack told his ego.

Now that Josh was in bed, Jack was sitting on the living room couch with his laptop. Having just finished the dinner dishes, Gus sat next to him.

"Why are you working?" Gus asked him seeing what was on his laptop screen.

"My father's visit set me back. I have a few things to finish." So much for his plan not to bring work home with him. He had put it off until after Josh's bedtime, but now it had to be done. That's not how Gus saw it though.

"Come on. I'm horny. Stop working and attend to my needs," Gus said and tried to put Jack's hand on his crotch.

Jack pulled his hand back, but he didn't plan to keep him waiting long.

"Gus, please."

"Listen to you begging."

Jack couldn't help smiling. He looked at Gus and begged and scolded him with his eyes. "Just let me off the hook for an hour."

"You'll make it up to me," Gus said in a husky voice.

"You'll make sure I do," Jack said, understanding him perfectly.

Gus kissed his neck one final time then moved to sit down on the rug and leaned against Jack's legs.

"I'm a total lovesick idiot. I can't be away from you from more than a second without suffering," Gus said as he ran his hand up and down Jack's calf.

Jack was the same way. He had felt Gus's absence acutely every second he was gone. He just didn't want to confess it while trying to keep Gus subdued so he could do his work. As it was, Gus was sliding his hands up Jack's legs, higher on every pass. "What if we go out tomorrow?" Jack said hoping that might satisfy him.

"I'll arrange for a babysitter," Gus said.

*

The next night, Jack took him to the same place where they had their first official date. Hillhouse was as sumptuously decadent as before, but this time Gus felt the romance of the place even more intensely. The glowing white building with its walkways reaching out into the dark garden beckoned to them.

The weather was warmer and the night seemed deeper. Gus felt as if their table was the only one in the garden which was even more lush than before. A nearby stream bubbled pleasantly, and night birds were singing. It was a perfect night, and it gave Gus an idea.

After a sip of outstanding champagne, Gus said, "If I didn't know you better, I would think you were setting the stage for something."

For a moment Jack only stared. "You scare me," he said and took a big swallow of champagne.

"You scare me too. Don't tell me you still have doubts," Gus said, looking at him closely.

"Not doubts. I'm just afraid that something will take you away from me. I can't lose you," Jack admitted.

Gus leaned in and kissed him. For a moment they shared the taste of champagne then Gus said, "I can fix that. I need two people in my life to make it complete – Josh and you. And you need us just as much. That's why you're scared."

"What's your solution?" Jack asked, obviously afraid to hear the answer. "Should I just hand myself over to you the way Doug handed you the bistro, and say 'Here, fix this.'"

"You don't need fixing, just loving. The kind you can trust to last forever,"

Gus said.

"Forever?" Jack seemed startled by the word.

"This is what we're doing. We're building a strong, loving relationship out of me being a pushy jerk and you running scared every two minutes, and it's still going to last forever."

"How?" Jack asked him with a smile.

"Because we love each other like only two idiots who don't know what the hell they're doing can love each other."

Jack just kept giving him a wry, disbelieving look until Gus kissed him again. He kissed him hard this time, a kiss full of need and desire. Its slick heat carried a binding promise.

"Believe me now?" Gus said, pulling back after searing Jack's mouth with his own.

"Sure. Anything you say," Jack said with a slightly glazed look in his eyes. He sobered quickly though. "It seems too soon. I was desperate to have the perfect family life once before, and I made a big mistake."

"We're not a mistake, and we're far from perfect," Gus told him. "Just do it right this time. Pick someone you love and someone you believe in with all your heart."

"I do believe in you."

"And the other thing," Gus prompted him.

"Yes, I love you," Jack said grudgingly.

"Smile when you say that. Tell me I'm your man, the only man for you," Gus demanded. He was such a greedy jerk, but he needed Jack to give into him.

"You are the only man for me. Anything else?" Jack asked.

"Everything else. But if we are going to be together for eternity, like I know we will be, you'll have plenty of time to tell me everything I want to hear."

"But first I have to say I do."

"Hold your horses. I haven't asked you yet," Gus said.

"I'm ahead of you on this. I think I'd like to try being married to you," Jack said, putting very little effort into his so-called proposal.

"You should have let me do it, because that's the worst proposal ever," Gus told him.

"But you'll still say yes," Jack said with a confident smile.

"Do it right," Gus insisted. "This is the last proposal you'll ever make, you know. With me, it's for life."

"OK. Gus, I want to be happy with you. Marry me." Jack's voice was hushed and his eyes gleamed as he looked deep into Gus's eyes.

Gus wanted to complain about the brevity but he couldn't. Tears came to his eyes, and he hugged and kissed Jack. It was all he could do. He couldn't speak yet. Finally, he whispered, "Yes, yes. I want to make you so happy."

He looked into Jack's eyes and saw tears there and so much love and hope

that Gus almost started sobbing. He took a deep breath instead. He wanted to remember this moment forever and blubbering like a baby wasn't going to make for a pretty picture.

For a long time he couldn't stop kissing Jack. He didn't want to let go of him so they reclined there, wrapped up in each other. It was a beautiful night that Gus knew he would relive for the rest of his life.

*

The night air had cooled, but Jack felt feverish. After only two glasses of champagne, he was drunk from Gus kissing him and from the enormity of it all. Did it really happen? Did he propose to Gus? Jack had answered one final dare from him and let his heart fly to him. Now he was dazed, his mind whirling. If Gus wasn't holding him in his grip, Jack would have been lost. Gus kissed him, his fingers digging in through Jack's clothes.

Jack didn't want to, but he dragged his mouth away from Gus's.

"I love you, and I'll never let you go," he said to Gus. Jack wanted him to know how devoted he was to him, that he was in this with his whole heart. His love for Gus consumed him. It ripped him up inside, and it healed him.

"You already promised that when you proposed to me," Gus told him. "Now let's hop into the bushes and see if we can get ourselves arrested or at least banned from this place for life."

"I guess I'm having this touching moment by myself," Jack growled at him.

Gus laughed. "I love it when your eyes flash like that." He leaned in and waited for Jack to kiss him.

Jack couldn't help himself. His mouth inched closer and his lips brushed Gus's. With that soft touch, he parted Gus's lips. He took a breath and kissed him deeply. If he could, he would have poured all his love for this exasperating man into that kiss. As he lost himself to the love and passion that flowed between them, Jack felt they were already becoming one.

As soon as they got to the house, Abby was out of there, rushing off to meet some friends. Josh greeted them at the door, already in his pajamas.

"Glad you're up. We have news. Jack and I are going to be getting married," Gus announced with no preamble.

Josh gasped then he got serious. He scratched his chin as he looked from Gus to Jack. "Good, good," he said. "What do I do?"

"You're going to be my best man," Gus told him.

"Best kid," Josh corrected him. "What about Jack? Who's going to be his best man?"

"I'll ask Doug. He is responsible for bringing me into your lives," Jack said, surprising Gus with his choice.

Josh nodded with approval. Then he grew thoughtful again and kind of

shy as he looked at Jack. He went over to Gus and motioned for him to come down to his level. "Is Jack going to be my dad now?"

"Ask him," Gus said with a smile.

Josh took a deep breath and turned to Jack. "Are you going to be my dad?"

"Would you like that?" Jack asked in a voice tight with emotion.

Josh nodded several times then launched himself at Jack for a hug. "It's a deal!" Josh yelled, overexcited. "Another dad, oooof!" he huffed. Then he looked at Jack solemnly. "Dad likes having me as his kid. I think you'll like having me as your kid too."

"Definitely," Jack said while he tried not to cry.

Gus took both Josh and Jack in his arms and hugged them tightly. As Josh hung around his neck and Gus kissed him, Jack knew that he was holding in his arms everything he needed to be happy.

The End

Books by Trina Solet

His True Home

Alec has retreated to his childhood home after a life of too much fun. When a little boy is abandoned on the road leading to Alec's home town of Seaview Pines, Alec is the one who ends up taking care of him. Now Cory is on his way to join them. He was abandoned by his mother as well and wants to give Teddy, his little brother, the family he never had. As they spend time together, it's up to Cory to draw out the serious, silent little boy. He also has to convince Alec that his home town isn't just a temporary refuge. It's where all three of them belong.

Manny To The Rescue

Why would Owen be terrified of Connie and Maggie, his two adorable little nieces? Because he is about to be left alone with them. Owen thinks he is going to have to take care of his nieces by himself until Dan shows up. If Owen approves, Dan is ready to be the girls' manny. Right from the start, Dan is a big help and an even bigger temptation. And Owen isn't the only one being tempted. When he was younger, Dan had a crush on Owen. Now that he is living with him, Owen has never looked hotter. The crush is back in full force. Too bad Dan isn't the kind of guy Owen is into. But even a hint that he is interested might spur Dan to make a move. Unfortunately, Dan is bringing trouble with him, and he doesn't even know it. When Owen becomes a target, will Dan be there in time to save him?

His Winter Heart

Wes is living a lonely, stark existence when he meets Colin, a lively young guy in desperate circumstances. Wes is so taken with him that he has to have him. His decision to invite Colin to spend the night is going to turn his quiet life upside down.

Colin almost finds himself sleeping on the street. When the tall, blond man makes him an offer, he can't say no either to the money or to the man. Colin is impulsive and full of contradictions. He refuses to sell himself for money and ends up homeless because of it. But when Wes offers to pay him for sex, Colin jumps at the chance to go home with him. Something about Wes strikes a chord with Colin. He knows there is a warm heart under the serious, impassive exterior and an awesome body under all the layers of winter clothes.

Things don't go as planned when Wes decides that Colin is too young and inexperienced and refuses to sleep with him. That doesn't mean that Wes can stay away from someone who shakes up his world.

The more time Wes spends with Colin, the more he wants him. Colin feels the same way, and he isn't shy about getting what he wants. His relentless pursuit might pay off if Wes doesn't let his family history and his fears about the future keep them apart. Will Wes let go of his inhibitions and allow himself to love the younger man?

And Manny Makes Three

Mark is a struggling college student who has been working as a nanny for a nice family, but they don't need him any more. Zack has been raising his son, Al, by himself and needs help. Al is a funny kid, and Zack is a funny dad, but more serious issues lurk under the surface. Will Mark be able to deal with these two? And how will Zack and Mark deal with their mutual attraction?

Unexpected Dad

Tyler finds a big surprise waiting on his doorstep. Ready or not, Tyler is a dad. Tyler didn't know he had a daughter until she suddenly dropped into his life. Whether he is ready for her or not, little Julie needs a father. Or maybe two. Tyler and Jake have been best friends, inseparable since college. Now they have to adjust to Tyler's new role as a dad. As Jake helps him cope with being a new father to a little girl, Tyler might be looking at two big changes in his life.

More Than a Manny

A very young, rich widower needs a nanny, but a hot nanny would be even better. That's where Nate comes in. Brent is a loving but irresponsible father to two young children from a marriage of convenience. He needs Nate in his life, but how will Nate, a first time nanny, fit into his unconventional household? The kids are a handful, especially little Georgie. Her big brother, Ricky, has a few issues of his own. But Nate is more than ready to take on the

challenge and let all three of them steal his heart.

Duncan the Third

Patrick and his little sister, Wendy, have just moved into Duncan's building and that means trouble. Patrick is exactly the kind of guy Duncan can't resist. Together he and his little sister might be the family Duncan has been yearning for but only if he takes a chance and lets them into his heart. Unfortunately, Duncan hasn't been lucky when it comes to relationships. After getting his heart broken too many times, he has sworn off younger men. While Duncan struggles against his attraction to him, Patrick is determined to win him over. As Patrick tries to change his mind, can he also heal Duncan's broken heart?

Poison Heart

Is there anything Vince and Cal won't do for each other? The two of them grew up together and fell deeply in love. They were poor but happy until Cal made a big mistake and ended up in jail. He did it for Vince. To get him out, Vince is willing to do anything. Roland Granger has the power and influence to make Cal a free man. All he wants in return is Vince. Even if Cal never forgives him, Vince is willing to sacrifice himself. Now he has to make sure that Cal accepts this unwanted help. And while Vince is trying to set things right in his own life, can he reunite Roland with a self-destructive young man who loves him?

Make It Better

A favor leads to a life changing experience. Ray is willing to do anything for the man he considers his savior. His mission of mercy is Marcus, a young man who can't overcome his guilt over a tragedy in his past. Is Ray making a terrible mistake giving his heart to him, or will his love for Marcus be strong enough to bring him back?

My Love Is Real: The Benson Brothers Story

For almost a year Sean and Brian thought they were brothers. Sean wants him more than anything, but will Brian ever accept his love? His pride is only one of the obstacles standing in their way. A dangerous man has a claim on Brian.

Where He Belongs

Jack thought he had everything only to end up without a wife, a best friend or a child. Now he is closed off and afraid to love. After despair nearly cost him his life, he can't afford another heartbreak. Burying himself in work, Jack has made business his whole life. Now a business opportunity has led him to Gus, the one man who can break down his defenses.

Gus doesn't know what he is getting himself into when he flirts with his new boss. The uptight younger man is irresistible to him. Is Gus being

reckless when he falls for Jack despite all the warning signs? After all, Gus is a happy, single father to a little boy, and Josh is a happy kid.

As he is drawn into their lives, Jack finds that Gus and his little boy are everything he needs and what he is most afraid of. Jack can't risk his heart again, but he might be won over by these two goofballs despite himself.